CHAPTER - III

CULTURAL NATIONALISM:

WEEP NOT, CHILD and THE RIVER BETWEEN

The term 'culture', although generally associated with artistic activities only, encompasses more than that and is inevitably linked up with a people's way of living, whether they comprise a village, a clan, a tribe or a nation. It is, as Ngugi puts it, 'the sum of their art, their science and all their social institutions, including their system of belief and rituals.' During the struggle and progress of a community against the forces of nature, there 'evolves a body of material and spiritual values which endow that society with a unique ethos', which is expressed in the various artistic forms -- songs, stories, dances, paintings, sculptures, ritual and ceremonies. This body of values, linked up as it is with the life of a community, changes and develops with changes in the society. Also, communities with different social, political and economic systems produce different kinds of cultures. Thus ancient Indian, Egyptian and Mesopotamian societies, though existing almost at the same time, show different kinds of cultural developments.

2. Ibid., p.4.
After colonising Kenya - as also some other parts of Africa - the British asserted that they had come to bring enlightenment and progress to a people who had no social, political, economic or cultural traditions. Not only was this an obviously false contention, but it is also contrary to the very origin and development of a society - any society. In the process of acting on their natural environment through a combination of their labour and technology, a people create a social environment, expressing themselves in terms of an economic arrangement. Soon the community also develops a political structure. The next step is that of developing a cultural environment which is simultaneously a product of the economic and political processes and also an instrument for commenting on these structures. These comments take the form of an educational system, a religious system, a language, a literature and forms of performing arts like dances and songs which give that society a distinctive character.

In this respect most societies in Kenya had a highly developed structure with subsistence-oriented economies, collective leadership and strictly laid down norms of social behaviour and a substantial body of songs, dances and narratives. However, with the coming of Christianity a process of disintegration of the various
set-ups began because acceptance of christianity meant an outright rejection of the values and rituals which had held them together. The missionaries, therefore, started condemning various aspects of different African cultures -- their dances, their songs, their images of gods and their rituals -- as 'primitive', 'barbaric' and 'savage' and supplanting them by their own which they considered to be superior. It is, however, a moot point whether the production and possession of highly sophisticated weapons of instantaneous annihilation of the entire human race makes a society less barbaric and savage and its culture superior to the ones in which people rely on primitive weapons like poisoned arrow or matchets. Again, it is a point of debate whether societies pursuing money-economy and the ruthless laws of market forces, allowing individuals to amass huge amounts of wealth by exploiting fellow human beings and using that wealth for further exploitation of fellow human beings are culturally superior to those in which means of production are communally owned and in which no individual is allowed either to accumulate unlimited amount of wealth or exploit others for furthering his wealth. Progress in this respect, as William James put it, is a 'terrible thing'. Although more tolerant and better organised -- socially, politically and culturally -- these societies
were damned as 'primitive' and their traditions, customs and rituals were labelled as superstitions or fetishisms. And this by people who still believe in table-rapping, spooks and spiritism.

Such wholesale condemnation of the Kenyan culture, was not only desirable but perhaps essential from the point of view of the colonising British because, although their aim was to get at the people's land and other Kenyan resources, it would not have been either complete or secure without a control of the Kenya's cultural environment, its religious systems, its education system, its literature and its music.

Thus, to begin with, the British missionaries, who preceded the colonial administration asserted soon after their arrival in Kenya that various Kenyan tribes had no systems of educating their young. What they in effect meant was that there were no 'schools' modelled on the modern western systems of education. But no society, however primitive, can do without 'educating' its younger generations. It is only through education, that a society is able to pass on the body of knowledge that has been handed down to it by the previous generation as well as the knowledge it has accumulated by its own experience. Again, it is also through 'education' that individual
members are made to conform to the norms evolved by a society for its organisation and development. Thus, to say that the Kenyans had no systems of education before they were introduced to it by the missionaries and the colonial administration is to deny the very founding principles of any social organisation.

Let us, as an illustration, take a brief look at a specific case: the educational system among the Gikuyu -- the largest among the various groups in Kenya -- before the arrival of the British.

Among the Gikuyu, "the child has to pass various stages of age-grouping with a system of education defined for every status in life. The parents take the responsibility of educating their children until they reach the stage of tribal education." The children are first educated in the family and clan traditions. For them, 'the homestead is the school'.

The Gikuyu being primarily agriculturists, a father takes his sons to the garden for practical training. Here, he makes them digging sticks -- moro -- for the sons to play with, while he busies himself with either weeding or turning the soil. By observing their father the sons learn to use the digging sticks and become practical agriculturists. Simultaneously, the sons are

taught the names of herbs, plants, trees and their various uses. If the father is a herdsman, he'll teach the sons to recognise their animals individually through their colour, size, shape of horns or any other distinguishing feature.

As for the daughters, the mother undertakes a similar responsibility of teaching them all things concerning the management of the homestead. In the evenings, she teaches both boys and girls the laws, customs and the moral code of the community.

Piercing of ears marks the advancement from childhood to boyhood. But the biggest and most significant step in the latter is circumcision, which admits a boy or a girl to the full membership of the community. Thus the youth 'comes of age' and is 'born again'. The boys are now taught various martial arts and are also allowed to mix with circumcised girls. An uncircumcised male child has no possession rights, cannot build his own homestead and cannot participate in a war to defend the tribe. Circumcision of a child also raises the social status of the father who now becomes an elder of the lowest rank.

This brief description of the social ladder gives us a fair idea of the education system among the Gikuyu.
Similar education systems exist among the Luo, the Masai, the Nandi and other tribes as well.

And now a quick glance at the system of religious organisation, once again among the Gikuyu.

The religious system among the Gikuyu operates at three different levels. First of all, there is Ngai, the supreme deity or the highest God. Sacrifices are offered or rituals or ceremonies performed to Ngai only on the occasions of national (tribal) importance, although even on occasion of birth, initiation, marriage and death of every Gikuyu, communion is established with Ngai. Mount Kenya -- the mountain of brightness -- is considered to be the earthly dwelling place of Ngai and all ceremonies or sacrifices are generally performed under sacred trees facing Kere-Nyaga which is the Gikuyu name for Mount Kenya. The Gikuyu religion does not involve daily prayers or religious ceremonies. "It is only when humans are in real need that they must approach him, without fear of disturbing him and incurring his wrath."

The second set of ceremonies is associated with the spirits of ancestors which has been called 'ancestor worship' in a loose English translation, but which is

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4. For a detailed discussion on the religions system among the Gikuyu, see Facing Mount Kenya op.cit., p.231-268.
5. Ibid., p.237.
actually 'communion with ancestors'. This is established/performed when a taboo has been broken or some ill-luck has befallen an individual members of a family.

The third level of religious ceremonies involves 'nature worship'. Since the Gikuyu are primarily agriculturists and as such are in constant touch with natural phenomena -- in fact, they are dependent on some like the rains -- they offer propitations to nature on occasions like planting and harvesting of crops. Such ceremonies are led by either elders -- Morathi, as they are called in Gikuyu -- or medicine men who are also called mundo mugo.

Since these two aspects of Gikuyu culture, to take only one example amongst many in Kenya -- namely, the education system and the religious system -- are a part of the larger system of the Gikuyu social organisation, the missionaries together with the colonial administration decided to attack simultaneously these two aspects particularly, in order to destroy the Gikuyu way of life and replace it by their own. This in itself, as we have stated earlier in this chapter, was a means to getting at the people's land and other natural resources in Kenya.

After initial resistance, the missionaries, backed as they were by guns, were able to establish
churches in the various areas and entice some Africans to convert to Christianity. They also introduced a restricted version of the western system of education primarily through the mission-run schools, which had the twin aims of attracting more Africans to Christianity and also of creating a class of Africans who would not only help the colonial government in running its day-to-day administration but which would also 'sell' its legitimacy among their fellow Africans. Thus the long term aim was--as in other colonies as well, India for instance--to divide the society by weaning away a section of it to western way of thinking and living, thereby perpetuating their rule. Since acquiring western education and religion meant an entry to the periphery of the privileged world of the mzungu rulers, particularly at a time when things were becoming worse in the native reserves, a sizeable number of Africans fell into the trap and looked forward to education in such schools at any cost. Even those who were opposed to the white colonial rule and whose ultimate aim was to overthrow them also thought it would be possible only through the acquisition of their education which they designated as whiteman's magic. Thus, from very early during the colonial period, a high premium came to be placed on the western system of education among those Africans who were ambitious in life.
It was at this juncture when the credibility of the western system of education had been established that the colonial administration decided to strike a blow at the roots of the African way of life. They decided to deprive those Africans of education whose parents believed in female circumcision. Now, as we have mentioned earlier in Chapter II, circumcision of both boys and girls formed a very significant part of the Africans' social structure and they took strong exception to this interference in their way of life. A movement was, therefore, launched immediately to set up independent churches as well as independent schools. As Africans were able to see through the real aim of this cultural imperialism, these twin issues of education and female circumcision soon became an integral part of the Africans' overall struggle against the colonial government. Since issues of culture are very sensitive and have a strong, direct appeal to the emotions of the people, these issues soon acquired as much significance as the problems of land deprivation and forced labour among the Africans. A resurgence of cultural nationalism therefore became a part of the tide.

6. So controversial became the problem of female circumcision that the whole issue was discussed in the British Parliament and the government was forced to publish a white paper on it.
of nationalism sweeping over Kenya.

However, within this rising wave of cultural nationalism, there was a discordant note too. While a large number of Kenyans still put much premium on western form of education, considering it as a way of reconciling the two antagonistic ways of life -- European and African -- there were many others who wanted to give that up too, because they felt that it did more harm than good to the Africans. Thus at a crucial moment in the history of their struggle, Africans in Kenya found themselves divided over the issue of western education. Or, perhaps we could put it in another way: western education succeeded in dividing the Kenyan Africans at a crucial point in their history.

A writer, as we have noted earlier, may choose a single event or a character to highlight a whole phenomenon. Ngugi Wa Thiong'o, when he came to recreate the history of his people through fiction, chose for his first two novels -- Weep Not, Child and The River Between -- the events relating to the introduction of western education as well as Christianity. As during the

freedom struggle, so also in Ngugi's novels, the two issues went hand in hand, each having an impact on the other.

The River Between is Nagugi's maiden attempt at novel writing, although as Ngugi himself informs us it was his second published novel. It is for this reason of having been written first and also because of the fact that the period of Kenyan history dealt within The River Between is prior to that of Weep Not, Child that we shall discuss The River Between first.

The River Between is first of a series, representing Ngugi's efforts to recreate the history of his people from the very beginning to the most recent times. In this novel, Ngugi critically examines and evaluates, primarily through the aspect of Christianity the cultural clash between the Africans and the foreign invaders. The story, confined to a small section of the Gikuyu tribe has a validity not only about similar situations under colonialism elsewhere in Africa but has an almost universal validity.

Although Ngugi begins his story in the middle --

9. Ngugi tells us that he wrote and published Weep Not, Child while he was preparing the final draft of The River Between which he had written earlier.
at a time when the white christian missionaries have already arrived and have entrenched themselves in parts of Kenya -- he soon takes us to the very beginning -- to the Gikuyu myth about the origin of man -- while tracing the origin of the present clans of the people. As we shall see, he will continue to do this -- going back and forth in history -- not only in this novel but also in others as well.

The River Between dramatises the lives of two factions of a Gikuyu clan living on the two ridges -- they are called Kameno and Makuyu -- on either side of a valley called 'the valley of life'. The river flowing through the valley is called Honia which, as Ngugi informs us, means 'cure or bring back to life'. The ridges when seen from a distance appeared to be 'antagonists':

You could tell this, not by anything tangible but by the way they faced each other, like two rivals ready to come to blows in a life and death struggle for the leadership of this isolated region.

This description of the physical shapes of the ridges in a way sets the tone of the novel because we soon learn that the people of the two ridges too are 'antagonists' and are

locked in 'a life and death struggle for the leadership of the isolated region'.

The present rivalry between the ridges, we now come to know, is because the people of one ridge--Makuyu--have been converted into christianity while those of the other--Kameno--are still believers in their traditional religion. Waiyaki is the hero of the novel and as the story progresses he is destined to play a mediatory role in trying to reconcile the rival inhabitants of the ridges. Waiyaki's father Chege is a wellknown elder of Kameno, who is respected and feared at the same time: respected because he 'knows the meaning of every ritual and every sign' and feared because 'he could see visions of future'. Mixing myth and reality, Ngugi tells us that Chege was related to the mythical character of Mugo, the great Gikuyu seer. Like Mugo of the great Gikuyu myth, Chege too had predicted the coming of the 'butterflies' to their ridges. His prediction had come true when Livingstone had come amongst them and Joshua and Kabonyi had converted to the new faith, 'abandoning the ways of the ridges'. Chege, however, is now old and wishes to see the other part of Mugo's prophecy fulfilled which had predicted that a saviour of the Gikuyu would arise from amongst his own clan and who would drive the white people
away from the ridges. Chege pins his hopes on his son Waiyaki whom he tells one day:

Now listen my son, Listen carefully, for this is ancient prophecy.... I could do no more. When the man came and fixed himself in Siriana, I warned all the people. But they laughed at me. May be I was hasty. Perhaps I was not the one. Mugo often said you could not cut the butterflies with a panga. You could not spear them until you could learn and knew their ways and movements. Then you could trap, you could fight back. Before he died, he whispered to his son the prophecy, the ancient prophecy: "Salvation shall come from the hills. From the blood that flows in me. I say from the same tree a son shall rise. and his duty shall be to lead us and save the people!" He said no more. Few knew the prophecy. Perhaps Kabonyi, who has betrayed the tribe, knows about it. I am old, my time is gone. Remember you are the last in the line.

So Chege entreats with his son to take up the task of saving his people. He advises him to go 'to the Mission place' and learn 'all the wisdom and all the secrets of the whiteman' but asks him to 'keep on remembering, salvation shall come from the hills'. Waiyaki realises the meaning of it all, though 'in body he was still a boy':

Waiyaki felt close to his father as he had never felt before. He felt a glow rising inside him. Was he not drinking from a calabash of trust and responsibility? Tiitheru, of a truth, he was maturing.

The hidden things of the hills were being revealed to him.

In course of time Waiyaki turns up at the Siriana Mission where he is soon joined by his childhood friends Kumau and Kinuthia. There, under the influence of Rev. Livingstone he 'learned and worked hard'. Ironically, impressed by Waiyaki's 'quick progress' the white missionaries see in him 'a possible brave christian leader of the church.'

Ngugi now shifts the scene and takes us to the other ridge -- Makuyu. Joshua, we are told, was among the first to be 'saved'. He has two daughters -- Nyambura and

Muthoni. On a particular fateful day, the younger one, Muthoni, confides in her sister Nyambura that she wants to be circumcised. As daughters of a christian, they both knew that the very thought of a circumcision -- a tribal rite observed obligatorily by both boys and girls at the beginning of puberty -- is 'sinful'. As Nyambura tells Muthoni -

But father will not allow it. He will be very cross with you. And how can you think of it?.... You are a christian. You and I are now wise in the ways the white people. Father has been teaching us what he learnt at Siriana. and you know the missionaries do not like circumcision of girls. Father has been saying so. Besides, Jesus told us it was wrong and sinful.

By showing this intense desire for a tribal rite in the hearts of the children of a devout christian, Ngugi provides a concrete instance of a cultural conflict between the native Africans - represented here by Chege

13. Circumcision in the case of girls was a kind of Clitoridectomy. As stated earlier, this custom was denounced by the Christian missionaries as 'brutal' and savage'. For more details see Kenyatta, Facing Mount Kenya, op.cit.
and other residents of Kameno and the White Europeans missionaries and the African coverts here represented by Livingstone, Joshua and other residents of Makuyu.

Muthoni, however, fails to get convinced by any reasons for considering female circumcision as something 'wrong and sinful', particularly because her own parents had undergone circumcision and were also devout christians:

Father and mother are circumcised. Are they not christians? Circumcision did not prevent them from being christians? I too have embraced the white man's faith. However, I know it is beautiful, oh so beautiful to be initiated into womanhood. You learn the ways of the tribe. Yes, the white man's God does not quite satisfy me. I want, I need something more. My life and your life are here, in the hills, that you and I know.

Muthoni is determined 'to be a real girl, a real woman, knowing all the ways of the hills and ridges'. She decides to go away to her aunt in Kameno quietly and get herself 'initiated'. Waiyaki too is a candidate for the 15. Ngugi, The River Between, op.cit., p.28-29.
ceremony, although his attitude against these tribal customs is one of guilt, thanks to his years at Siriana:

Waiyaki's absence from the hills had kept him out of touch with those things that most mattered to the tribe. Besides, however, much he resisted it, he could not help gathering and absorbing ideas and notions that prevented him from responding simultaneously to these ideas and celebrations. But he knew he had to go through the initiation.

The story, however, takes a strange turn when Muthoni becomes seriously ill, as her wound does not heal. The people of Kameno blame it all on Joshua who they believe must have put 'a father's curse' on her. She is removed to Siriana mission hospital where she dies, clinging to her dream of reconciling the two: tribal religion and christianity. Her dying words, spoken to Waiyaki are:

Tell Nyambura, I see Jesus. And I am a woman, beautiful in the tribe....

Joshua, Muthoni's father, considers her death to be God's wrath on her and he wanted it to be 'a warning to those

17. Ibid., p.61.
while Chege, Waiyaki's father, considers it to be a punishment to Joshua and 'a warning to all to stick to the ways of the tribe to the ancient wisdom of the land, to its ritual and song.' Thus Muthoni's death further deepens the antagonism between Kameno and Makuyu. For Livingstone, the head of the Mission at Siriana it was 'a God sent opportunity to root out the evil of female circumcision from among the Gikuyu.

The death of Muthoni coincides with the arrival of the whiteman's administration in Makuyu and the people are scared that they would have 'to pay taxes'. Chege soon falls ill - terminally - and the people of Kameno find themselves weak against this double attack of the missionaries and the administration. It is, however, natural that small resistance groups spring up in the ridges. Waiyaki finds himself drawn into it. Since Siriana has now been closed to those who believed in tribal customs, Waiyaki opens a school for them with the help of Kinuthia and Kamau, his childhood friends. The latter is the son of Kabonyi, who was with Joshua but has now broken with him and returned to the fold of the tribe. Waiyaki also becomes a part of the new Kiama which was being formed 'to preserve the purity of our tribal customs.

18. A Secret sect or a society.
Marioshoni, as Waiyaki's school is called, inspires the people all around for self-help in education and such schools – people’s own schools – grow up like mushrooms even if these were nothing more than a shed hurriedly thatched with grass. While Waiyaki works for his school from morning till evening like a man possessed, he is worried about the deepening rivalry between the people of the two ridges – the tribals and the christians. He feels 'himself standing outside all this', completely 'isolated' and confused. He yearns to reconcile the two through education:

And Waiyaki saw a tribe great with many educated sons and daughters, all living together, tilling the land of their ancestors in perpetual serenity pursuing their rituals and beautiful customs and all of them acknowledging their debt to him.

However, opposition to his plans for such a reconciliation comes from two quarters – one expected and another quite unexpected. Unexpected opposition comes from Kabonyi, who, jealous of Waiyaki's growing popularity,

tries to run him down publicly for his obsession with the whiteman's education. Expected opposition comes from Joshua, who is not so much jealous as apprehensive of Waiyaki's growing popularity as a teacher. Already a few of his converts had gone back to the ways of the tribe and he is afraid that more may do so under the growing influence of Waiyaki. Kabonyi opposes Waiyaki by appealing to the tribe not to be 'led by a youth' by asking them if the 'tail ever led the head' or 'cubs the lion'. However, people continue to follow Waiyaki by urging him to 'show us the way. We will follow'. This further antagonises Kabonyi who is now looking for any opportunity to avenge his humiliation.

During the same period, Nyambura, whom Waiyaki had hardly seen since Muthoni's death, comes quite close to him, primarily because with each passing day 'she becomes weary of Joshua's brand of religion' and going to church is becoming a burden to her. She too, like Muthoni, is getting convinced of the need for a reconciliation between christianity and the tribal ways of life. She, therefore, sees in Waiyaki, 'her saviour, her black Messiah, the promised one would come and lead her into the light'. Waiyaki, in a chance meeting, expresses his love for her and asks her to marry him. She, however, turns him down, saying that her 'father will
not allow it' and she cannot disobey him. Kamau, the son of Kabonyi, who has always felt a sense of rivalry towards Waiyaki, and who is, like his father, looking for an opportunity to destroy Waiyaki, secretly witnesses this meeting in which Waiyaki proposes to Nyambura and is turned down.

With the white people penetrating into the interior, the rivalry between the people of the two ridges increases and Joshua is identified as the principal enemy of the tribe, since he was with the white missionaries of Siriana, who people believe, were sent to pave the way for the white settlers. All this makes Waiyaki extremely unhappy. He feels particularly guilty for having missed an important opportunity for preaching reconciliation at a meeting where he was accepted as 'Teacher' and a leader. While he is waiting for another opportunity, rumours are spread by Kabonyi and his son Kamau that Waiyaki had been seen many times with Joshua's uncircumcised daughter Nyambura and that he intended to marry her. Waiyaki is caught in this strange situation: While he wants to bring about the much needed reconciliation, the atmosphere is vitiated by Kabonyi by presenting him as an enemy of the tribe, as a threat to its 'purity'.

Summoned before the Kiama, Waiyaki is accused by
Kabonyi of 'spreading impurity' and selling people to the whiteman. When he is asked about his plans to marry Joshua's daughter Nyambura, he refuses to give a clear 'no' as an answer - in spite of Nyambura having turned him down -- and his admission of being in love with her dooms him as a teacher and as a leader. The Kiama decides to work more intensely against Joshua, since it still holds him as the main enemy. Waiyaki, having made an initial error by confessing his love for Nyambura, now makes another - a more grievous one. He decides to go and warn Joshua against the impending violence by Kiama. However, the wheel of fortune turns full circle against him when Joshua refuses to believe him and turns him out of his house. Nyambura, siding with Waiyaki, expresses her love for him in her father's house and is also turned out of the house immediately.

A new understanding dawns on Waiyaki - as if in a flash - and he realises that 'education for an oppressed people is not all'. The new awareness also needs 'expression at a political end':

All at once Waiyaki realised what the ridges wanted. All at once he felt more forcefully than he had ever before the shame of a people's land being taken away, the shame of being forced to work on those
same lands, the humiliation of paying taxes for a government that you know nothing about.

But Waiyaki's realisation comes a little too late. Kabonyi has already poisoned not only the Kiama but also the whole gathering which now finds him guilty of breaking the oath of the Kiama and of deciding to marry Naymbura, an uncircumcised girl and the daughter of Joshua, an enemy of the tribe. No amount of argument convinces the gathering and the novel ends with both Waiyaki and Nyambura being placed in the hands of the Kiama for appropriate punishment.

Together with Weep Not, Child which we shall discuss below, The River Between deals with the disintegration of a traditional Kenyan society under pressure from within and without—pressure from within being of a rigid, obscurantist, traditional people governed by secret sacred oaths of the clan, people who refuse to move towards modernisation and the pressure from without being that of ruthless self-opinionated European—people with superior technology. The disintegration is tragic for people like Muthoni and Waiyaki who are neither

rigid about a totally traditional way of life nor keen about a totally modern, Christian way of life. Since they do not identify themselves completely either way, not only are their efforts of reconciling the mutually exclusive systems frustrated by extremists like Kabonyi and Joshua but they themselves meet tragic ends. Muthoni, though born in a Christian family in Kameno dies while undergoing initiation rites of female circumcision and Waiyaki, though born in a family of traditional seers in Makuyu, awaits a possible death at the hands of the Kiama - the secret sect - for intending to marry Nyambura, an uncircumcised Christian girl.

Waiyaki's obsession throughout the novel - except towards the very end - with education as the panacea for all the ills of the traditional society at cross roads of modernisation represents not only Ngugi's own personal faith in education during the earlier phase of his life but also of a whole generation of the African population. This is what Jomo Kenyatta has to say about the mood in 1929 when during the Kenyan freedom struggle the people of Kenya were threatened with the withdrawl of the mission school facilities for the children of those parents who practised either female circumcision or polygamy:

However, the African, having no other
choice superficially agreed to fulfill those conditions in order to get the little education which the missionary schools afforded him. The education, especially reading and writing was regarded as the whiteman's magic, and thus the young men were very eager to acquire the new magical power; a fact which undoubtedly had escaped the notice of the Europeans.

Even when realising that bringing about a reconciliation between the two factions of the tribe is the most urgent need of the hour, Waiyaki procrastinates because he considers:

Education was really his mission. This was his mission... Education was the light of the country. That was what the people wanted. Education. Schools. Education.

So much taken up is Waiyaki with the idea of education that he ignores even the machinations of Kabonyi against him:

Kabonyi did not exist. He saw only schools, schools everywhere and the thirst that burned the throats of so many children who...

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looked up to him for the quenching water....Education was life.

Only towards the end does Waiyaki realise that his obsession with education has caused more harm than good. In a moment of self-criticism he realises:

Oh, there are so many things I did not know. I had not seen that the new awareness wanted expression at a political level.

EDUCATION FOR AN OPPRESSED PEOPLE IS NOT ALL.

In fact, in the character of Waiyaki, Ngugi portrays very effectively the inherent contradictions in the desire of the Kenyans going all out to acquire western education in order to equip themselves with knowledge which they hoped to use for freeing themselves from the colonial rule but in the very process of acquiring it, becoming alienated from not only their customs and rites but also from the people themselves.

Chege urges his son Waiyaki to go to Siriana:

You go there. I tell you again, learn all the wisdom of the whiteman. And keep on remembering salvation shall come from the

25. Ibid., p.160., emphasis added.
hills. A man must rise and save the people in their hour of need. He shall show them the way; he shall lead them. Waiyaki learns hard and makes 'quick progress'. But this education has an adverse effect on his allegiance to the tribal way of life. The point is driven home very pognantly through the opposite attitudes which Muthoni and Waiyaki display at their initiation ceremonies. Muthoni, a christian, is very clear about her initiation:

However, I know it is beautiful, oh so beautiful to be initiated into womanhood. You learn the ways of the tribe: yes, the white man's God does not quite satisfy me.

Waiyaki, on the other hand, has developed a sense of guilt about various tribal rituals and customs which Ngugi attributes to his education at Siriana:

Waiyaki's absence from the hills had kept him out of touch with those things that most mattered to the tribe. Besides, however, much he resisted it, he could not help gathering and absorbing ideas and

27. Ibid., p.29-30.
notions that prevented him from responding simultaneously to those dances and celebrations. But he knew HE HAD TO GO through initiation.

And again, when on the eve of the initiation day, the young and the old both let themselves go completely 'in the magic motion of the dance', Waiyaki finds himself inhibited and uneasy. In fact, as Ngugi shows it, the western system of education has done something worse than just weakening the hold of tribal customs and rituals on the minds of the young. It makes them so pliant that the very idea of disobeying authority, however unjust and oppressive, is repugnant to them. Waiyaki, for instance, fails to understand Muthoni's behaviour of coming away from Kameno:

The idea that she had actually run away, actually rebelled against authority somehow shocked him.

It is, therefore, no wonder that Chege's original dream of turning Waiyaki into the deliverer 'had grown less vivid, less real' and he sees it mainly 'as an illusion, an old Man's dream'.

29. Ibid., p.47, emphasis added.
When it comes to this aspect of western system of education and its influence on the Kenyan youth, we find many similarities between the characters of Njoroge and Waiyaki. This theme of disillusionment with western education is something that Ngugi would continue to pursue through his later writings - both fictional and non-fictional. The obvious reason for this pursuance was that it played a very crucial role at a critical juncture in the Kenyan struggle for freedom, as has been pointed out by numerous national leaders. Here is Oginga Odinga on this aspect:

Yet events proved in the long run that mission activities and policy anticipated the needs of government before the latter itself realised them. The mission produced men who were rebels against the old way of life for a while but were then themselves absorbed into mission and administration. They became tame middlemen, shadows and subjects of white mission men, and any stirrings in them to become independent leaders of their people were suppressed by the allegiance to the mission hierarchy, and the fact that, once educated they were
This ambivalent attitude of Waiyaki's becomes the besetting flaw of his character and is directly responsible for his decision not to throw his lot wholeheartedly with the tribe at a crucial juncture and is also responsible for his tragic end. He sincerely believes that a reconciliation is possible.

Ngugi shows an equally ambivalent attitude towards Christianity, again through the character of Waiyaki. Although Waiyaki sees himself as the deliverer of his people, as the chosen one in Mugo wa Kibira's prophecy, and yet he is attracted to the church:

After all, he himself loves some Christian teaching. The element of love and sacrifice agreed with his own temperament. The suffering of Christ in the Garden of Gathsemane and His agony on the tree had always moved him...

The very fact that Ngugi shows Muthoni dying of wounds

suffered during the circumcision, shows his refusal to completely disagree with church which condemned female circumcision on grounds of - among others - unhygienic conditions in which the ritual took place and the lack of after care.

This ambivalence on the part of Ngugi comes out more powerfully in a short story -- *The Village Priest* -- written around the same time in which a kind of competition develops between the village medicine man and the converted christian priest who, incidentally, is also named Joshua and the place is also Makuyu. While the medicine man promises to bring rain to the draught-stricken village and appears to be succeeding miraculously, the priest shaken momentarily in his newly found faith against the effectiveness of medicine man, goes and prays to Agikuyu, the traditional God of the Gikuyu, for postponing the rains. Since the rains do come and Joshua and his religion appear to have been defeated by the Gikuyu religion, Ngugi ends the story on a note of renewed faith on the part of Joshua who is shown discussing with the white priest Livingstone 'the problems of Makuyu now that the rain had come and the drought was

32. For more details see Kenyatta, Facing Mount Kenya, op.cit.
Again, although Joshua considers Waiyaki to be a villain primarily due to his popularity among the people and leaves no opportunity to humiliate and harm him or his religion, Waiyaki rushes an ill Muthoni to the mission-run hospital in Siriana. He proposes marriage to Joshua's uncircumcised daughter Nyambura. He accompanies her to the Church. He even warns Joshua of the Kiama's plans to harm him. All these he does at a great personal risk. In fact, in the end he pays for it all but shows no regrets for having done so, primarily because he does not consider a belief in Christianity in a completely negative light.

Waiyaki's ambivalent attitude towards Christianity represents not only Ngugi's own response to Christianity during his youth but also that of a whole generation of Kenyan freedom fighters.

Thus we see that in his very first novel -- The River Between -- Ngugi wa Thiong'o chooses to critically examine and evaluate Kenyan history through the two most significant symbols of cultural clash between the natives and the foreign invaders, namely education and religion.

Dathorne has suggested that "Ngugi offers little hope and no alternatives in this novel." This may appear to be

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so because Ngugi himself was not very clear about the way out from this impasse of Christianity versus tribal ways of life. Waiyaki's confusion is in fact due to Ngugi's own lack of social vision of the future.

Weep Not Child is Ngugi's first published novel with which Ngugi arrived on the East African literary scene and which soon established him as the most prominent writer of the region. The novel portrays an important phase in the Kenyan struggle for independence when education -- western education -- was still looked upon by Kenyans as a possible solution to their ills under colonialism. In the backdrop of a society which is not only in transition but is in turmoil too, the novel depicts a typical Gikuyu family - a microcosm for the entire Kenyan society, no doubt - which is destroyed when it tries to adapt itself to the ways of the west, particularly its culture. This Ngugi does by exploring the twin leit-motifs of education and politics.

Ngotho -- the head of the family -- is like thousands of other Gikuyu, a 'muhoi' -- squatter -- on the land of a fellow black, Jacobo, in Mahua village where he

35. Written after The River Between, as Ngugi himself inform us, Weep Not, Child became his first published novel. However, for the purpose of present analysis we have stuck to the order of writing rather than of publication.
lives with his two wives -- Njeri and Nyokabi -- and his four sons -- Boro, Kori, Kamau and Njoroge. The fifth -- Mwangi -- had been killed during the the second world war in which he, like a large number of others, had been forced by the British government to fight on their behalf. Ngotho's home, we are told in the beginning of the novel, 'was well known for being a place of peace'. Currently there is a lot of excitement in the family because the youngest son -- Njoroge -- is about to go to school, the first one in the family to do so.

Naturally, the most excited is the child himself: 'Would You like to go to school?'

'O mother!' Njoroge gasped. He half feared that the woman might withdraw her words."

His mother, Nyokabi, looks at it as a means for the enhancement of her status in the society:

Nyokabi was proud of having a son in school. It made her soul happy and light-hearted when she saw him bending double over a slate or recounting to her what he had seen at school....It did not matter if anyone died poor provided he or she could

36. Ngugi *Weep Not, Child* op.cit., p.3. This and all other references from the novel are from the 1983 edition, published by Heinemann Educational Books.
one day say, 'Look, I've a son as good and as well-educated as any one you can find in the land.

His father too takes pride in the fact that his son is going to school:

Ngotho was proud that his son would soon start learning. When anybody now asked him whether he had taken any of his sons to school, he would proudly say. 'Yes!'. It made him feel almost equal to Jacobo.

Kamau, Njoroge's half-brother who is training to be a carpenter, considers education to be a means of future family prosperity. He tells Njoroge who wants him also to join school:

Don't worry about me. Every thing will be all right. Get education, I'll get carpentry. Then we shall in future be able to have a new and better home for the whole family.

At this point, however, Ngugi introduces the theme of politics (as he had done in The River Between too when

Chege had taken Waiyaki to the sacred grove) through a story which Ngotho tells the children in his Thingira one evening. Such story-telling, as we have stated earlier in the chapter, was a part of the traditional Gikuyu way of educating their young. Thus Ngugi presents an interesting situation whereby the young people under colonialism received their education from two distinct sources -- formal missionary schools and traditional Gikuyu means. As will be evident from the story, such education, coming as it did from two different sources based on two different ways of life, more often than not pursued contrary aims. The story is the well-known Gikuyu myth about the beginning of man, the handing over of land by Murungu, the Creator, to Gikuyu and Mumbi, the first couple. Ngotho refers to the coming of the white man and the misappropriation of their land as had been prophesied by Mugo wa Kibiro, the Gikuyu seer -

Then came the white man as had long been prophesied by Mugo wa Kibiro, that Gikuyu seer of old. He came from the country of ridges, far way from here. Mugo had told the people of the coming of the white man. He had warned the tribe. So the white man came and took the land. But at first not
Ngotho adds a personal note to the story by observing that the land on which he himself is working as a muhoi, once belonged to his father. Finally, he refers to yet another prophecy by Mugo, according to which a son of the tribe would one day lead them --like Moses-- to deliverance from the Mzungu who would then go away, leaving their land once again in their possession. Thus we see Ngugi blends the theme of education with that of political independence when Njoroge, begins to believe that he himself would be the prophesied deliverer:

He knew that for him education would be the fulfilment of a wider and more significant vision -- a vision that embraced the demand on him, not only by his father, but also by his mother, his brothers and even the vision. He saw himself destined for something big, and this made his heart glow.

Together with his father Ngotho, Njoroge comes to believe in education as an important weapon with which he would accomplish the formidable task of political emancipation.

41. Ibid., p.39.
Thus Njoroge represents that section of Kenyan society which had placed its hopes of national independence on acquisition of western education. However, in the meantime, Njoroge is becoming a victim of the western values and which, ironically enough, are cutting him off from his native roots. This is beautifully illustrated by Ngugi through an incident involving Njoroge and Mwihaki who studies with him in the same class and who is the daughter of Jacobo. Njoroge, clad only in a piece of calico, is going to look for his brother Kamau when he suddenly notices Mwihaki coming from the opposite direction. He feels extremely embarrassed on not being properly dressed:

For a time, he was irresolute and hated himself for feeling as he did about the clothes he had on. Before he had started school, in fact even when he made that covenant with his mother, he would never have thought that he would ever be ashamed himself of the calico, the only dress he had ever known since birth.

As a part of his education Njoroge is exposed to christianity which taking him away from his religion makes

him also believe in the Christian God and His sense of justice:

His belief in a future for his family and the village rested then not only on a hope for sound education but also on a belief in a God of love and mercy, or Adam and Eve.

He comes to identify the oppressed Kenyans as those children of Israel about whom he had read in the Bible. So deep-rooted does become this faith of his in Christianity that it is not shaken even after the revivalist Isaka, while is beaten and shot dead under his very eyes. He continues to harp on 'the sun will rise tomorrow'. Even Mwahiki taunts him:

You are always talking about tomorrow, tomorrow. You are always talking about the country and the people. What is tomorrow? What is the people and the country to you?

In sharp contrast to Njoroge is Roro, his half-brother who has been to the war in which Njoroge's real brother Mwangi was killed. Roro believes in neither the prophecy of the Gikuyu seer nor in the love and mercy of

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43. *Ngugi, Weep Not, Child*, op.cit., p.49.
the Christian God:

When the war came to an end, Boro had come home, no longer a boy but a man with experience and ideas, only to find that for him there was to be no employment. There was no land on which he could settle, even if he had been able to do so. As he listened to this story, all these things came to his mind with a growing anger. How could these people have let the white man occupy the land without acting? And what was all this superstitious belief in a prophecy?

In a whisper that sounded like a shout, he said 'To hell with the prophecy'.

Thus with characters like Boro, Ngugi introduces the next phase of Kenyan struggle for freedom, the phase in which a section of the younger generation came to have no faith in western system of education. In the meantime, the national struggle catches up with the village and the family. Boro and Kori, having gone away to the city, come back on weekends together with 'some others' and discuss affairs of the land with the village elders. In one such

45. Ngugi, Weep Not, Child, op. cit., p. 27.
meeting, they talk of a national strike and suggest the organisation of a strike on the farm as well. Ngotho who works on the farm is, therefore, drawn into it, although initially he was against any militant action.

Njoroge, however, continues to pin his hopes on education as conditions go from bad to worse:

Only education could make something out of this wreckage. He became more faithful to his studies. He would one day use all his learning to fight the white man, for he would continue the work that his father had started. When these moments caught him, he actually saw himself as a possible saviour of the whole God’s country. Just let him get learning. Let that time come when 46 he.....

In fact, western education becomes a kind of obsession with not only Njoroge but with everyone else:

Whatever their differences, interest in knowledge and book learning was the meeting point between people such as Boro, Jacobo and Ngotho. Somehow, the Gikuyu people always saw their deliverance as embedded in

46. Ngugi, Weep Not, Child, op.cit., p.82.
education. When the time for Njoroge to leave came near many people contributed money so that he could go. He was no longer the son of Ngotho but the son of the land.

However, soon education alienates him, as was aimed at by the colonisers, from active political life and it becomes an alibi for escape, an excuse for Njoroge to stay away from the violence which is engulfing the whole Kenyan society and into which everyone is being drawn. Even the news of his father and brothers being in trouble and his own expulsion from school does not move him:

But all these experiences now came to Njoroge as shocks that showed him a different world from that he had believed himself living in. For these troubles seemed to have no end, to have no cure. At first these had a humbling effect so that he did not seem to feel. All he knew was that his father and his now only brother were in trouble and he himself was not at school.

48. For a fuller discussion on Njoroge's escapist attitude, see Clifford Robson, Ngugi wa Thiong'o, (London, 1979), p.25-45.
49. Ngugi, Weep Not, Child, op.cit., p.120.
It is therefore no surprise that in the end we find that Njoroge had lost faith "in all things he had earlier believed in, like wealth, powers, education, religion."

The western education had made him a drifter, a coward and 'an old man at the age of twenty.'

Parallels have been suggested between *Weep Not Child* and Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* which too shows the disintegration of the natives -- Ibos of Umuofia in this case -- when they come in contact with the western ways of the colonising British:

> In form and pattern *Weep Not Child* bears a remarkable similarity to Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart*. Like Achebe, Ngugi also relates the story of a community that crumbles because of exposure to the west.

However, Ngugi's novel is different in form and is more powerful that Achebe's in many ways. For instance, Ngugi, unlike Achebe, does not go into great many details of the tribal life and its custom which many earlier African novelists considered essential for the understanding of the western audience and which made their novels look more

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like ethnographic texts than works of fiction. Instead, Ngugi plunges straight away into contemporary Kenyan history, filling in the most essential details of the Gikuyu past through myths and stories. Again, Ngugi deliberately chooses a theme -- education -- which is very controversial. During the long drawn out struggle for freedom, right to education had been made an issue by the Kenyans. Through the character of Njoroge in this novel and that of Waivaki in *The River Between*, Ngugi examines critically the wisdom of pinning their hopes on a western system of education as a means to fighting the western colonialism. Njoroge, for instance, tells Mwihaki, Jacobo's daughter:

"Y-e-e-s. I've heard father say so. He says that if people had had education, the white man would not have taken all the land. I wonder why our old folk, the dead old folk, had no learning when the white man came."

Quoting Jomo Kenyatta, Kamau tells Njoroge that 'Education is the light of Kenya'. Listening to his father who

52. When the British disallowed admissions in mission-run schools to the children of those Kenyans who practised polygamy or who believed in the tribal rituals like female circumcision, the Kenyans hit back by launching an independent Schools Movement and set up their own schools.

believed that 'Education is everything' and many others who also emphasised the significance of education, Njoroge comes to believe that education alone could put an end to the violence and chaos which had engulfed not only Ngotho's family and the village but the whole of Kenya:

Only education could make something out of this wreckage. He became more faithful to his studies. He would one day use all his learning to fight the white man, for he would continue the work that his father had started. When these moments caught him, he actually saw himself as a possible saviour of the whole God's country. Just let him get learning. Let that time come when he...

There is no doubt that the character of Noroge has been drawn by Ngugi with a touch of irony which was to gradually develop as a full-fledged characteristic of Ngugi's style. The ironic effect is achieved by counterposing the weapon of education with that of militant action. Noroge and his brother Boro are portrayed by Ngugi as two characters representing two different -- almost opposite -- approaches to the problem of seeking

independence from the colonial oppression.

With a typical hot-blooded reaction -- 'To hell with the Prophecy' -- to Ngotho's patient wait for the fulfilment of Mugo wa Kibiro's prophecy, Boro plunges himself into the militant struggle and it is through his character that we gather Ngugi's initial reaction to the violent phase of the movement, the so-called Mau Mau:

Boro had now been in the forest for a considerable time. His own dare-evil action, for he did not care what happened to him personally, had made him a leader of the other Freedom Fighters. The ripe hour of his youth had been spent in blood-shed in the big-war. This was the only thing he could do efficiently.

From the tinge of irony in the last sentence - 'This was the only thing he could do efficiently' -- it is evident that Ngugi does not support -- at least not wholeheartedly -- the violent aspect of the forest fighters' struggle. This attitude of the author becomes more explicit with Boro laying more emphasis on 'revenge' than on 'fight for freedom':

Boro had always told himself that the real

reason for his fight was a desire to fight for freedom. But this fervour had soon worn off. His mission became a mission of revenge. This was the only thing that could now give him fire and boldness. If he killed a single white man, he was exacting a vengeance for a brother killed.

Mr. Howlands, represents the white settlers for whom the land had been misappropriated. Ngugi's initial attitude towards this class of people also seems to be ambivalent:

Mr. Howlands...was a typical Kenya settler. He was a product of the First World War. After years of security at home, he had been suddenly called to arms and he had gone to the war with the fire of youth that imagines war a glory. But after four years of blood and terrible destruction, like many other young men he was utterly disillusioned with 'peace'. He had to escape. East Africa was a good place. Here was a big trace of wild country to conquer.

57. Ibid., p.30.
Ngugi seems to be drawing a parallel between the characters of Howlands and Ngotho. Howlands too has been ousted from his 'home'. He too has lost a son in the war. He too loves the land - the land in Kenya - as much as Ngotho does:

They went from place to place, a white and a black man. Now and then they would stop here and there. Examine a luxuriant green tea plant, or pull out a weed. Both men admired this shamba. For Ngotho felt responsible for whatever happened to this land. He owed to the dead, the living and the unborn of his line, to keep guard over this Shamba. Mr. Howlands always felt a certain amount of victory -- whenever he walked through it all. He alone was responsible for taming this unoccupied wildness.

And again:

'You like all this?' Mr. Howlands asked absent-mindedly. He was absorbed in admiring the land before him. 'It is the best land in all the country', Ngotho said emphatically. He meant it,

Mr. Howlands sighed. He was wondering if Stephen would ever manage it after him.

'Ve don't know who will manage it after me.....'

Ngotho's heart jumped. He too was thinking of his children. Would the prophecy be fulfilled soon.

'Kwa mijini Bwana. Are you going back to - ?'

'No', Mr. Howlands said, unnecessarily loudly.

'.....your home, have...

'My home is here!' 59

Ngotho was puzzled.

It is only after Mr. Howlands has been made the D.O. that we are made to see another dimension of his personality -- the brute white settler who considers Mau Mau evil because they try to oust and send them back to England and reclaim their lost lands:

And who were these Mau Mau who were now claiming that land, his God? Ha, ha! He could have laughed at the whole ludicrous idea, but for the fact that they had forced him into the other life, the life he had tried to avoid... If Mau Mau claimed the only thing he believed it, they would see!

Did they want to drive him back to England,

the forgotten land? They were mistaken. Who were black men and Mau Mau anyway, he asked himself for the thousandth time? Merely savages! A nice word -- savages.

Even here Ngugi seems to be giving Mr. Howlands and his class a benefit of the doubt by suggesting that they are as much trapped in the situation as the native Kenyans themselves:

He now knew may be there was no escape. The present that had made him a D.O., reflected a past from which he had tried to run away. That past had followed him even though he had tried to avoid politics, government, and anything else that might remind him of that betrayal. But his son had been taken away.

Ngugi, however, is very clear about his attitude about one class of people - the Africans serving the cause of the white man. Chief Jacobo, 'the richest man in all the land around' on whose land Ngotho works as a Muhoi, represents this class of African collaborators. For Howlands Jacobo was a 'convenient man although he 'despised' him. Howlands

61. Ibid., p.76.
uses him, for instance, not only to break the peaceful strike but also for arresting the family members of Ngotho on false grounds like 'breaking the curfew order'. Ngugi portrays Jacobo in total servility to the white master, doing his dirty 'job' in return for petty economic favours:

Howlands had in fact helped Jacobo to get permission to grow pyrethrum. In turn Jacobo had helped him to recruit labour and gave him advice on how to get hard work from them.

Here then is Ngugi’s first novel -- *Weep Not, Child* -- in which Ngugi plunges straight into the political theme of Kenyan national movement. Moreover, Ngugi locates his novel at a very crucial phase in the history of colonial Kenya. While the first begins with the arrival of the white man, the second begins around 1945 and spans for about ten years — when the alienation of the Kenyan land by the colonial government was at a ‘menacing pitch’ with almost twentyfive percent of the Gikuyu population having been forced to leave their land and homes and shift to ‘reserves’. We view these developments filtered through first the *eyes* of Chege, Waiyaki’s father

and then through the eyes of the members of Ngotho's family, particularly Njoroge, who like Waiyaki in the earlier novel, is the protagonist of the novel. Both Waiyaki and Njoroge -- and a host of others too -- put too much faith in education as a weapon in this struggle while many others -- Boro and Kori represent them in this novel and Kaböyni in the earlier novel -- accuse them of sitting on the fence and believe armed struggle to be the only solution. Ngugi, therefore, is able to show clearly the lack of unified approach among the Kenyan Africans.

Ngugi's treatment of both Waiyaki and Njoroge, the protagonists, is full of irony. It has been suggested that the real reason for this ironic treatment is Ngugi's own sense of guilt for himself having opted for education at a time when most boys of his age were helping the Mau Mau movement. Again, Waiyaki and Njoroge, like Ngugi himself at one time, also seem to be having too much faith in Christianity and the goodness of man as preached by the missionaries as a part of education. In fact, some of the early critics misinterpreted Ngugi's intentions of rewriting the Kenyan history by completely ignoring the

historical dimension. Lloyd Williams, for instance, while interpreting *The River Between* completely ignores the nexus between Missionaries and the misappropriation of the Africans' land which Ngugi clearly hints at and the refusal to see which becomes the dilemma in the characters of both Waiyaki and Njoroge. This is something which Ngugi was to resolve in the character of Kihika in his next novel — *A Grain of Wheat*.

Ngugi, as we make out from the character of Howlands, seems at this stage, to have some kind of a vague empathy for the white settlers. However, he comes down really heavily on the African collaborators like Jacobo, thereby indicting a section of Africans for the perpetuation of colonialism in Kenya. Ngugi, therefore, seems to be taking 'a balanced view' between the Europeans' and Africans' responsibility for atrocities on Africans. However, Ngugi was to deal with this aspect in more depth in his next novel *A Grain of Wheat* which had the most violent phase of the freedom struggle, viz., The Mau Mau Struggle as its theme and which we discuss in the next Chapter.