

Weep Not, Child: The Light of Kenya, a Story of Hope

Weep Not, Child, by Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o, traces the adolescence of a Kikuyu boy named Njoroge as his life begins to crumble in the days leading up to Kenya's independence. Njoroge is an intelligent boy who, elated to have the chance to go to school, sees himself excelling there in the hopes of improving the life of his family and his community. But soon his life gets complicated when his brothers join the revolutionary Mau Mau and become involved in the tense politics of the region. When the danger surrounding his family increases, Njoroge's desire to learn only intensifies, as he is convinced that the only way for him to help regain ancestral lands and to help Kenya is through a formal education. His life quickly falls apart, though, when his father's death and his brothers' activities force Njoroge to leave school. Njoroge takes a job for an abusive shopkeeper who ultimately fires him, and his lofty dreams of studying abroad and returning to help his family and his nation are destroyed. His last hope – to run away with a childhood friend with whom he has fallen in love – is crushed when she won't leave with him. Helpless in the ruins of his once promising life, Njoroge tries to hang himself, although his two mothers rescue him before he follows through.

The story doesn't have a fairy tale ending because Thiong'o doesn't try to sugar-coat history. From the trenches of World War II, to the politics of the Mau Mau and the intertribal and racial conflicts in colonial East Africa, this story presents a complex view of the birth of modern Kenya. Despite the somewhat disappointing ending and the series of hardships that batter Njoroge throughout his adolescence, the novel instills a certain peace and optimism about even the most depressing realities. *Weep Not, Child* is an important book for audiences around the world to read because its engaging characters, broad historical scope, and universal themes of

perseverance and hope in the face of loss can foster a global awareness by illustrating how people in starkly different circumstances share the same dreams and values.

The most dominant elements of Njoroge's character are his hard work and desire for success, which, according to him, can be obtained only through a good education. Njoroge takes to heart the statement of Jomo Kenyatta, the father of modern Kenya, who said, "Education is the light of Kenya" (Thiong'o, 40). Njoroge "knew that for him education would be the fulfillment of a wider and more significant vision... He saw himself destined for something big, and this made his heart glow" (Thiong'o, 41). And Njoroge isn't the only child in his world who is motivated to do well in school. In Njoroge's life, school is an expensive privilege, and it is something for which he and his classmates are immensely grateful. I think the value of education is lost on many more privileged adolescents in the United States, where many of my friends and I often take school for granted. But school is a gift. For thirteen years, from kindergarten through twelfth grade, every child in this country has a sanctuary of learning through our system of free public education. Education should not be taken for granted, and Njoroge expresses how hard some people can work for an education.

Another important element is the portrayal of Njoroge's family. In his culture, the men often have multiple wives, a concept that is often maligned in Western culture, in part because of the inequalities it supports between men and women. But Njoroge's family is as healthy and caring as any family can be. I envied the fact that Njoroge has not one, but two, mothers who care for him deeply. It can be easy to criticize a tradition simply because it is different from one's own, and polygamy is a particularly interesting example because of the strong stigma against it in the United States. Understanding different traditions can make people more conscientious global citizens by allowing people to develop empathy for another point of view.

Weep Not, Child is also important because, although it occurs in a time and a place where women are treated as inferiors, it represents women in a very positive light. From the first pages of the story when one of Njoroge's moms asks him if he would like to attend school, to the ending when his moms save him from committing suicide, Njoroge's moms are the roots of his life. Meanwhile, his father is killed and his brothers are imprisoned. While there are no male figures that help Njoroge throughout his perilous adolescence, his moms are always by his side.

Finally, *Weep Not, Child* accurately portrays the history of the Kikuyu people in era of Kenyan independence. It addresses the history of one of the largest countries in East Africa, which contains close similarities to nations across Africa during this period of decolonization. Stark inequalities in land ownership and ethnically-divided voting in Kenya's recent election show that the history and legacy of colonization continue to plague Kenya today.

Through the incredible story of Njoroge, *Weep Not, Child* not only presents an important history that has lasting importance in the world today, but it breaks the borders separating the different experiences of kids across the world. This novel tells a story that can be understood everywhere. The universality of Njoroge's quest for knowledge and the hardships within his family show how we as people have many more similarities than differences. More than any other book I've read, this novel has instilled in me a new awareness of and empathy for children in other cultures. *Weep Not, Child* can truly make a difference in young people by fostering a sense of global linkage and connection.

Works Cited

Thiong'o, Ngugi Wa. *Weep Not, Child*. London: Heinemann, 1988. Print.