EDUCARE

2024: 1

doi: 10.24834/educare.2024.1.860

Power, Discourse, and Student Agency in Colonial Education: An Analysis of Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o's Novel *Weep Not, Child*

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This paper aims to glean valuable insights from critical pedagogy in order to apply them to the field of African literary studies. Specifically, I am interested in how approaches inspired by culturally responsive education can help us revisit the important but under-researched topic of student agency as it features in fictional works that deal with colonial education in Africa. Although colonial education in literature has been the subject of intense focus in postcolonial theory, such theorizations largely examine how colonial education reproduces colonial rule through the dissemination of colonial discourse/ideology. When student agency in the colonial education systems is addressed, conventional postcolonial theory sees it as being overwhelmed or assimilated by colonial discourse and power. Ideas emanating from critical pedagogy and culturally responsive education are of value here in that they can elucidate how students interact with and even resist the pedagogical and political power of the colonial education system. Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o's novel *Weep Not, Child* is an illustrative example of how such a critical-pedagogy-inspired approach can help us reorient literary studies of colonial education systems.

Keywords: colonial education, Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o, power, resistance, student agency

1. Introduction

In this paper, I aim to outline worthwhile contributions of critical pedagogy on postcolonial theorizations of colonial education systems. I argue that postcolonial theory predominantly relies on what has been termed as the Foucauldian-Saidian tradition, a tradition that is mainly if not solely interested in examining and critiquing colonial discourse. Part of this dominant trend is the study and critique of the ways in which colonial education is an instrument of colonial domination, namely, how the institutions, texts, and agents of colonial education act to purvey colonial ideology and discourse and, thus, reproduce colonial rule. While this analytical focus on the edifice of colonial discourse (of which colonial education is a part) and the oppressive shadow it casts on the colonized world is laudable, its relative lack of focus on the goings-on in that overshadowed world can be limiting. In other words, focusing solely on colonial discourse analysis and critique risks neglecting the ways in which colonial discourse, in addition to colonial exercises of power, has been met with and even resisted by the colonized/imperialized. Critical pedagogy research, especially critical responsive pedagogy, can be useful in remedying this blind spot. Critical pedagogy strives to make education more culturally inclusive and responsive to students. Underlying this normative ideal is the empirical/historical observation that students, especially those seen as culturally disempowered, interact with not only the discursive traditions of the school but multiple discursive and cultural traditions that inform their experiences. Furthermore, underlying the ideal that education should engage student experience for better educational outcomes is the realization that students are active agents that resist or at least disengage from pedagogical interventions that elide their experiences.

Thus, I aim to employ these student-centered empirical observations of critical responsive pedagogy as a springboard to conduct my literary analysis of Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o's novel *Weep Not, Child* (1987) and its portrayal of the colonial education system. I focus on student experience and agency, a perspective that is lacking in much of postcolonial theorization of colonial education due to its analytical preoccupation with the discourse and agency of rulers. I specifically focus on the ways in which students interpret and respond to colonial pedagogical practices and texts. The picture that emerges from such a perspective not only shows the oppressive characteristics of colonial education but also provides a glimpse of pedagogical and textual interpretive practices that can serve as the foundation of education as a project of freedom – "a political and moral practice" that "affords students the opportunity to read, write, and learn from a position of agency … a way

of learning about and reading the word as a basis for intervening in the world" (Giroux, 2020, p. 178).

This paper explores fictional representations of teaching and learning; it does not deal with empirical data, although it takes advantage of empirical studies as a launching pad for its literary analysis. However, this is not to say that there is no correspondence between the literary material analyzed and empirical/historical reality. As Simon Gikandi (2000) argues, *Weep Not, Child* is informed by the twin impulses of capturing "Gikuyu physical and cultural landscapes" and imparting the author's own normative ideals (p. 41). In addition, this novel is frequently described as autobiographical in that it reflects the author's experience of the colonial education system in Kenya. It is the productive tension between these two literary impulses – that is, between the intention of capturing historical reality/experience and the infusion of normative ideas in the story – that makes it possible in this paper to view education as being historically oppressive while also having the potential for liberation in *Weep Not, Child*.

I begin by providing a brief overview of the novel, *Weep Not, Child*, and its author. I then outline some dominant readings of the text to discuss how the novel has been previously received by major postcolonial theorists. These readings are in line with a more general theoretical and methodological predilection in postcolonial theory of privileging colonial discourse as an object of analysis and critique at the expense of other matters. I conclude by drawing inspiration from studies in critical pedagogy, more specifically, culturally responsive education, to argue that an alternative anti-colonial vision of education emerges in the novel when student response to education, rather than colonial discourse, is the main object of analysis.

2. Brief Overview of the Novel and the Author

Written in the tradition of the Bildungsroman, *Weep Not, Child* is a novel that centers on the main character Njoroge and his family, who are *muhoi*, or squatters on land claimed by a character named Howlands, a white settler. Set in Kenya, much of the story takes place during the state of emergency declared by the colonial administration to combat the anticolonial movement and the Mau Mau

uprising.[1] Njoroge is a student in the colonial education system, but he is ultimately expelled due to his family's involvement in the Mau Mau movement. Thus, this novel is a fictional interrogation of colonial rule in Kenya, its history and mechanisms of control, and the ways in which it was resisted on a cultural and political level.

There is much about this novel that can be described as an autobiographical record of the author's life and experiences as well as those of his peers. Although this story is not an exact copy of Ngũgĩ's,

> Njoroge's life and education so closely paralleled that of the author and his local readers, many of whom had grown up under the state of emergency, that it was sometimes difficult to tell where to draw the line between fact and fiction. (Gikandi, 2000, p. 81)

Indeed, Ngũgĩ's parents were also *muhoi* in the so-called White Highlands, his brother was involved in the Mau Mau movement, and he himself was a student in the colonial education system. These and other autobiographical qualities serve as indices of historical reality in this fictional account of colonial rule and anti-colonial resistance in Kenya.

3. Postcolonial Theory and Colonial Discourse

Much of the postcolonial examination and critique of colonial rule in general and the colonial education system in particular is centered on exposing the mechanisms by which colonial institutions such as the school produce and disseminate colonial discourse as a means of dominating their subjects. However, such a perspective, although indispensable, may leave us with potential blind spots. For instance, Rosinka Chauduri (2020) argues that "Ruminations on the nature of the colonial education system to date still quite largely take recourse to the Foucauldian imperative of discourse creation within a power/knowledge nexus" (p. 41). She further asserts,

[1] The term *Mau Mau* is an externally given name to a militant anticolonial underground movement to which its members referred by many other names, such as *Uiguano wa Muingi* and *Gikuyu na Mumbi*. Ngũgĩ (2016) refers to it as the Land and Freedom Army and argues that the "meaningless mumbo-jumbo" name of Mau Mau was given to the movement by the colonial state to obscure its key demands, land and freedom (p. 67). With the establishment of the movement's paramilitary wing in 1951 (Furedi, 1989, p. 111), the Mau Mau launched an armed resistance campaign. It was put down with brutal violence following the declarartion of a state of emergency in 1952. Although the state of emergency may seem to be a response to Mau Mau revolutionary violence, historians argue that the emergency declaration (and government repression more generally) was, in fact, a major factor in pushing the movement towards armed revolt (Furedi, 1989, p. 118; Barnett & Njama, 2021, p. 47, Berman & Lonsdale, 1992, pp. 252-253).

"postcolonial theory, under Saidian influence" solely focuses on analyzing colonial discourse, thus ignoring the multiple and even contradictory ways in which this discourse has been received in the colonies (p. 43). Edward Said's work, particularly *Orientalism*, with its sole focus on analyzing the history and workings of Orientalist discourse, is a seminal example of this approach.[2]

Although Chauduri (2020) is mainly concerned with the Indian historical and literary scene, her characterization of postcolonial theoretical trends bears striking resemblance to the dominant readings of African literary texts. In an earlier instance of such readings, Sekyi-Otu (1985), in his article "The Refusal of Agency", argues, rather unforgivingly, that the character Waiyaki in Ngũgĩ's *The River Between* is politically paralyzed due to the education he receives; Waiyaki's education hinders his "critical, oppositional, and originative powers" by instilling in him a "petit bourgeois being and consciousness … in its education pusillanimity, its reverential (because referential) positivism, its unexamined dutifulness, and its … neutralist cult" (p. 167). Rather than indications toward anything of emancipatory value in Waiyaki's efforts, what emerges from Sekyi-Otu's analysis is a Waiyaki who, through his education, is utterly compromised by colonial power since he only seems able to provide colonially conditioned responses to the problems of colonialism. Such responses do not create "a new intellectual culture organically connected with national liberation and the seminal necessities of the emergent polity" but reproduce a depoliticized pedagogy inherited from the colonial authorities (p. 170).

Apollo Obonyo Amoko's interpretation of Ngũgĩ's wa Thiong'o's early novels makes similar points. Amoko (2010) argues that the colonial institutions in *The River Between* – the school, the hospital, and the church – "resemble each other … as conjoined repositories of colonial knowledge and power" (pp. 39–40). He continues, "Waiyaki's story is something of Ngugi's autobiography. Educated at elite colonial institutions,[3] Ngugi strives to invent an anticolonial tradition, but the colonial library overdetermines the paradigms and parameters of the struggle" (Amoko, 2010, p.

[2] This is a selective reading of Said. In his book *Culture and Imperialism*, the sequel to *Orientalism*, Said studies the subject of anti-imperialism in detail. That said, this kind of selective reading that primarily focuses on *Orientalism* is the basis of what has been termed Saidian postcolonial theory. Said's own position is more complicated than, and even at odds with, this postcolonial reception of his work.

[3] Ngũgĩ attended Aliance High School in Kenya and Makerere College in Uganda. He wrote his first two novels, *The River Between* and *Weep Not, Child*, while he was an undergraduate at Makerere College (Sicherman, 1989, p. 349).

48). Although Amoko (2010) offers a more sympathetic reading of Waiyaki's educational efforts than, for instance, Sekyi-Otu, he nonetheless builds on the latter's interpretation: Waiyaki's critique of "both tradition and colonial authority … displays the full force of the revisionary power lurking under his cheap colonial imitation. However, … the educational mandate Waiyaki propounds is still politically empty" (p. 45). Amoko (2010) concludes that the novel's tragic romance of "Education, Unity, and Freedom" (p. 46) is shot through with irony: "Waiyaki and the colonial school are the objects of subtle ridicule by a text that would seem to valorize them" (p. 39). He extends this interpretation of colonial education to *Weep Not, Child*, critiquing the African characters' endorsement of education as a means of national liberation by arguing that it masks "the function of the school as a means for the reproduction of an oppressive … order" and suggests "the level of mystification entailed by the ideology of the colonial school" (pp. 54–55). Echoing his ironic reading of the previous novel, he asserts that "Ngugi seems to have constructed [Njoroge] as an object of satirical ridicule … Far from uncritically embracing Englishness, Ngugi undertakes an ironic critique" (p. 58). It would seem, then, that the novels and their author should be read either as ironically distancing themselves from the school, which is ultimately read as a purveyor of colonial discourse and power, or as being symptomatic of colonial conditioning through the school.

Simon Gikandi (2000), albeit more nuanced in his approach, is in agreement with Amoko's reading of *Weep Not, Child*. Namely, he argues that the school in colonial Kenya is a site where "colonial culture" is taught and wherein students are locked "neatly in the prisonhouse of colonialism" (p. 87). In other words, both Amoko's and Gikandi's respective arguments emphasize colonial power in education and the discourses through which this power conditions colonial subjects. Moreover, Gikandi (2000) argues that Njoroge and his family's vision of education as an instrument of liberation is frustrated: "Njoroge cannot conceive his progress in the colonial school as inextricable from his dream of England and the mastery of Englishness," but due to the elusiveness of this dream to colonial subjects, education becomes "a source of disenchantment and further alienation" (p. 91). Even when Njoroge and those around him break from these colonial illusions and use their education to imagine and work toward a future beyond colonial rule, their efforts are still read as exemplifying colonial hegemony: "colonialism has authorized more palatable stories in place of the older Gikuyu mythologies, stories that have the potential for disrupting the synchronic narrative of colonial rule" but that nonetheless lead to "Njoroge's displacement in both his father's house and

the culture of colonialism" (p. 92). These stories provide a momentary sense of empowerment that ultimately leads "the colonial subject … to accept his nomadism or dispossession in the world" (p. 95). Thus, "education only leads to an awareness of one's nomadism, the lack of a stable place of identity in the world" (p. 97). For Gikandi (2000), colonial power in education is irremediable in this novel; the characters seem to live "in a world determined by the colonizer" (p. 97), and education seems only to lead to subjugation or alienation, not resistance or emancipation.

This kind of reading is not limited to Ngũgĩ's novels. In a widely cited study of Tsitsi Dangrembga's *Nervous Conditions* and its treatment of colonial education, Wright (1997) employs a similar symptomatic reading of the main characters in the novel. The novel's "network of metaphoric connections between education and food" leads him to argue that the consumption of food is expressive of "the intake of neocolonial cultural and educational values" and of "the educated elites deracinatory Englishness", whereas the inability or refusal to eat is expressive of the rejection of these values (pp. 112–113). However, even this rejection is interpreted as indicating the overarching might of discursive power:

> [T]he body steps in and acts on the mind's behalf, voicing its protest in physical terms, when the mind is unable to speak for itself for the reason that the only language available to it, the language in which its educational diet is encoded, is the patriarchal discourse of the colonial oppressor and his indigenous puppets. (Wright, 1997, p. 115)

This theme of "unvoiced resistance" (p. 120) – outside the purview of language and discourse – even though what is being protested "is often of a highly intellectual nature" (pp. 115-116), is central to Wright's (1997) analysis and is most forcefully argued in relation to Nyasha's[4] resistance, seen as "subversion through extreme submission to power discourses that generate hysteria and similar libidinal reactions" (p. 121); "Nyasha herself, for all her defiant regurgitations, is as anglicized in her own way as her parents and as neocolonial in her thinking" (p. 122). Wright concludes that "the stultifying power of colonial assimilation is revealed to be total and

[4] Nyasha is central character in *Nervous Conditions* and is the narrator Tambu's cousin. In contrast to Tambu, who comes from a peasant family, Nyasha's parents are educated professionals. As a result of having lived in England for several years, Nyasha is an anglicized character that experiences cultural estrangmenet in Zimbabwe/Rhodesia. However, Nyasha is more rebellious against colonial and patriarchal authority than her self-effacing cousin.

inescapable" and that the main character's narrative provides no directions to a way out of the neocolonial elites' "terminal Englishness" (p. 122).

Thus, the above critics view colonial education in the novels they analyze as reproducing colonial power through the inculcation of colonial and patriarchal discourse/ideology, a position I do not take issue with. What is more contentious, to my mind at least, is the notion that the African characters exposed to the colonial school, including those who attempt to resist its imperious doctrines and edicts, should ultimately be read as at best masking and at worst mimicking, if not representing, colonial discourse. Even more contentious is the view that characters attempting to construct alternative pedagogies and discourses to colonialist ones are either misguided or non-existent.

4. Critical Pedagogy and Student Agency

In order to reexamine the positions outlined above, which privilege colonialist discourse as the primary object of study or fashion colonialist discourse as all-pervading and assimilatory, approaches inspired by critical pedagogy can be of value. For instance, the concept of "funds of knowledge" is based on the premise that students are not only contained within the school but also draw on "family and community knowledge" and that schools can "appreciate and make use of" such knowledge to empower students (Subero et al., 2015, p. 45). Such an approach highlights how (culturally disempowered) students "live and participate in multiple worlds simultaneously," such as the home, the school, the church, and so on; through these worlds, they "enact different aspects of [their] identities." Thus, students "occupy the in-between spaces of two (or more) realities in these worlds, two (or more) cultures" (Porto, 2010, p. 47). We will return to this idea of participating in multiple cultures in the analysis of *Weep Not, Child*, especially relating to Njoroge's participation in multiple discursive and educational traditions, one centered on the school and another on the home. Moreover, such an approach does not need to limit its focus to the individual or local levels but can be scaled up by combining "the micro-level classroom interactions [with] the 'mid-level' institutional context (i.e., school practices and policies such as tracking and disciplinary practices), and the macro-level societal context" (Ladson-Billings, 1995, p. 160). This suggests that the discursive and experiential disjunction between the students and the classroom/teacher should be remedied not only at the level of the individual student or teacher,

for instance, by encouraging students "to use their home language while acquiring the secondary discourse" (Ladson-Billings, 1995, p. 161); rather, larger institutional and social structures have to be grappled with. A similar theme, the theme of connecting different levels of scale in addressing pedagogical issues, is prominent in our analysis of *Weep Not, Child*.

In addition, empirical and normative studies inspired by critical pedagogical approaches focus on student responses and agency when aiming to remedy educational practices that disempower and passivize students. In so doing, they assert that students resist pedagogical norms and practices that are foreign and oppressive to them. This resistance could be registered as an "underperformance" that disappears when more student-responsive techniques are employed (Gay, 2000, pp. 87–90), thus signaling that those norms and conceptions espoused by students will remain intransigent in the face of the assimilatory attempts by teachers. Such latent forms of resistance in students' responses to education are registered in *Weep Not, Child*, as shown below. However, student resistance may be more overt than this. For instance, Bennet et al. (2017) claim that "Children know when they are treated unfairly, and they question ways things are done in their school and community that result in unequal treatment of individuals and groups" (p. 244). Similarly, Szelei et al. (2019) argue that "When students do not feel equal and rightfully represented in school, they might develop resistance towards schooling, this way expressing their voices" (p. 177). They also report instances of such student resistance observed by teachers (Szelei et al., 2019). As discussed below, this overt form of resistance can be seen in the novel in Njoroge's anticolonial responses to colonial schooling.

With these reflections about education and student agency in mind, I now turn to *Weep Not, Child* and conduct a brief but illustrative literary analysis to show how these insights derived from critical pedagogy and culturally responsive education can augment and develop conventional postcolonial theorizations about the portrayal of education in such a novel.

5. Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o's Novel Weep Not, Child

The following excerpt from Ngũgĩ's *Weep Not, Child* (1987) depicts a classroom scene where the students are learning English in a rather oppressive and alienating manner in a colonial school.

> It was in Standard IV that they began to learn English.

Lucia, Mwihaki's sister, taught them. They all sat expectantly at their desk with eyes on the board. A knowledge of English was the criterion of a man's learning.

Stand = Rugama.

Teacher I am standing. What am I doing?

Class You are standing up.

Teacher Again.

Class You are standing up.

Teacher (pointing with a finger) You – no – you – yes. What's your name?

Pupil Njoroge

Teacher Njoroge, stand up.

He stood up. Learning English was all right but not when he stood up for all eyes to watch and maybe make faces at him.

Teacher What are you doing?

Njoroge (thinly) You are standing up.

Teacher (slightly cross) What are *you* doing?

Njoroge (clears throat, voice thinner still) You are standing up.

Teacher No, no! (to the class) Come on. What are *you*, *you* doing?

Njoroge was very confused. Hands were raised all around him. He felt more and more foolish so that in the end he gave up the very attempt to answer.

Teacher (pointing to Mwihaki) Stand up. What are you doing?

Mwihaki (head bent on one shoulder) I am standing up.

Teacher Good. Now, Njoroge. What is she doing?

Njoroge I am standing up.

The class giggled.

Teacher (very annoyed) Class, what is she doing?

Class (singing) You are standing up.

Teacher (still more angry) I am asking you … What is *she* doing?

Class (afraid, quietly singing) You are standing up.

Teacher Look here you stupid lazy fools. How long do you take to catch things? Didn't we go over all this yesterday? If I come tomorrow and find that you make a single mistake I'll punish you all severely. (Ngũgĩ, 1987, pp. 44–45)

Knowing English is presented in the beginning of this excerpt as "the criterion of a man's learning." Yet English is taught in quite an alienating and oppressive fashion. The only word that is translated for the students is the word *stand*, and the rest of the lesson simply presents the students with complete sentences with the verb *stand* in them. No translation is given for the pronouns used as subjects in these sentences. As a result, the students struggle to learn what they are expected to, provoking the ire of the teacher, which only exacerbates the students' confusion. It is as though English is not being taught to expand students' knowledge by connecting to and building on their already existing linguistic and cultural repertoire (through translation, for instance). Rather, English is imposed on the students in a manner that suggests it is not meant to be translated or put on par with other languages but simply internalized in an unadulterated form. As a result of this uncompromising pedagogical tactic, further confusion ensues when the students welcome a white missionary woman who visits them in their class in the afternoon with the greeting "Good morning, Sir." When the teacher swiftly corrects them, the students respond with "Good afternoon, Madam." However, the correction does not clear the confusion: "But some still clung to 'Sir'. It had come to be part of their way of greeting. Even when one pupil greeted another, 'Sir'

accompanied the answer" (Ngũgĩ, 1987, p. 47). This confusion seems not only to mimic the earlier one but also to contain a veiled authorial critique of power in that the students here do not seem to recognize, as they are expected to, that "Sir" (or "Madam") is a title that confers authority. Therefore, this passage is illustrative of latent student resistance to oppressive and alienating pedagogical norms and practices, something that Gay (2000), for instance, observes in her work.

In contrast to Lucia's classes, Isaka's reading classes provide an alternative pedagogical approach that is presented as more conducive to learning:

> When the teacher had come in, he made a strange mark on the board.
>
> 'A'. This was meaningless to Njoroge and others.
>
> *Teacher* Say Ah.
>
> *Class* Aaaaa.
>
> One felt the corrugated iron roof would crack.
>
> Teacher (making another mark on the board) Say Eee.
>
> That sounded nice and familiar. When a child cried he said, Eeeee, Eeeee.
>
> *Teacher* I.
>
> *Class* Iiiiiii.
>
> *Teacher* Again.
>
> *Class* Iiiiiii.
>
> *Teacher* That's the old Gikuyu way of saying 'Hodi', may I come in?'
>
> The children laughed. It was funny the way he said this. (Ngũgĩ, 1987, pp. 33–34)

There is a recurrent connection in this passage between the new letters and old knowledge. Each letter is presented, through cultural and linguistic translation, in ways that are accessible to the students. Thus, the class is much merrier than the one in the previous passage. It comes as no surprise that "Njoroge loved these reading practices" (p. 35) and that he "proved good at reading" (p. 33).

Through this juxtaposition of different ways of teaching English and literacy and their respective student responses, the novel seems to advocate for a more student-centered and translation-based pedagogical approach in order to prevent student disengagement and alienation. Therefore, education is portrayed not simply as alienating and oppressive but also as having the potential to be engaging and uplifting. Central to this potential is the teacher Isaka's pedagogical approach, one that allows for cultural and linguistic translation and consequently creates greater engagement and freedom in the classroom. Indeed, this teacher, whose name is a "Christian name, a corruption of Isaac" (Ngũgĩ, 1987, p. 33), seems to symbolize this kind of cultural and linguistic translation. Perhaps it is no wonder, then, that "[m]any stories went around about Isaka. Some said that he was not a good Christian" (p. 33). However, Isaka is not the only "corruption" of the Christian tradition that we find in this novel. I explore below the implication that not being a good Christian has for student agency.

Christianity has historically played an important ideological and institutional role in the establishment and reproduction of colonial rule. As a character in the novel puts it, "the land had been taken away through the Bible and the sword," adding that "[t]he Bible paved the way for the sword" (Ngũgĩ, 1987, p. 57). Moreover, Christian missionaries were instrumental in the establishment of colonial education. This historical reality is reflected in the novel: "Siriana Secondary School," a school that Njoroge ends up in, "was a well-known centre of learning. Being one of the earliest schools to be started in the colony, it had expanded much due mainly to the efforts of its missionary founders" (p. 108). Behind the façade of respect and comradery presented by these missionaries to Africans lies an insidious but persistent belief in white supremacy, which is inculcated in pupils:

> [The headmaster] believed that the best, the really excellent could only come from the white man. He brought up his boys to copy and cherish the white man's civilization as the only hope of mankind and especially of the black races. He was automatically against all black politicians who

> in a way made people to be discontented with the white man's rule and civilizing mission. (Ngũgĩ, 1987, p. 115)

Therefore, Christianity, the Bible, and the colonial school are instruments by which missionaries reproduce and disseminate colonial ideology. With this in mind, Njoroge's engagement with the Bible may come as a surprise:

> The Bible was his favorite book … 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. Who long ago walked on this earth with Gikuyu and Mumbi, or Adam and Eve. It did not make much difference that he had come to identify Gikuyu with Adam and Mumbi with Eve. To this God, all men and women were united by one strong bond of brotherhood. And Gikuyu people, whose land had been taken by white men were no other than the children of Israel about whom he had read in the Bible. So although men were brothers, the black people had a special mission to the world because they were the chosen people of God. This explained his brother's remark that Jomo was the Black Moses. (Ngũgĩ, 1987, p. 49)

This passage is interesting for several reasons. Firstly, it portrays a confluence of literature and orature: the story of Adam and Eve in the Book of Genesis is merged with the story of Gikuyu and Mumbi (also a genesis story) in Kikuyu tribal narrative. This confluence indicates that Njoroge participates in multiple discursive and educational traditions, one centered on the school and another on the home. As Jomo Kenyatta (1965) writes about traditional Kikuyu society, "Apart from the system of schools which has been introduced by the Europeans, there is no special school building in the Gikuyu sense of the word: the homestead is the school" (p. 96). It is in this homestead/school that "teaching is carried out in the form of folklore and tribal legends" (Kenyatta, 1965, p. 100). Kenyatta's historical claims are reflected in the novel (Ngũgĩ, 1987). Secondly, this confluence is justified in Biblical terms, which runs contrary to colonialist proselytizers' belief that other creation narratives are fallacious and blasphemous. Here, Christianity is seen in universalist but accommodating and syncretic terms. Thirdly, the Bible, a text that is central in colonial education and in paving the way for colonialism, is here interpreted to fit a politics of anticolonialism. Accordingly, the Biblical texts "may be read as two-sided discourses" (p. 68), to borrow Foucault's (2020) words. These texts "were expected to have the effect of ideological control" (Foucault, 2020, pp. 68–69) but, nonetheless, lead to dissenting readings that

are informed by a different set of agents with an alternative ideological and historical perspective. Lastly, this passage connects different levels of scale; micro-level textual interpretations informed by various discursive and educational traditions are connected with a macro-level prophetic political vision of society, one filtered through the twin lenses of a biblical and black messianic tradition. Such a vision seeks to bring about a transformation in colonial social relations and institutions in order to restore lost lands from settler colonial rule.[5]

Thus, the passage shows how colonial ideas and discourses are subject to change and reinterpretation by those who receive them. This is expressive of student agency; that is, students do not simply imbibe ideas and discourses in a passive manner but actively reformulate them for their own ends and, in Njoroge's case, for anticolonial ends. Additionally, Njoroge's anticolonial response bears out the empirical and normative assertions of culturally responsive pedagogy in that his more overt form of resistance, a self-assertive hermeneutic effort, connects different discursive and educational traditions as well as different levels of scale.

This is not to say that students receiving colonial education only produce anticolonial responses in *Weep Not, Child*. For instance, although Isaka is initially portrayed as worldly and endearing, he is later transformed into a revivalist[6] preacher with an apocalyptic vision (Ngũgĩ, 1987, pp. 89–90). Njoroge and Mwihaki, formerly Isaka's students, attend one of Isaka's sermons in church:

> The old preacher was in the pulpit. He spoke of the calamity that had befallen the Gikuyu people … Why was this so? It was because people had disobeyed the Creator, the Giver of Life. The children of Israel had refused to hearken unto the voice of Jehovah. They would be destroyed in the desert where they would be made to wander for forty years. (Ngũgĩ, 1987, p. 89)

[5] This prophetic vision is not only based on Biblical texts but also on already existing tribal prophesies of change associated with Mugo wa Kibiro (Ngũgĩ, 1987, pp. 25–26).

[6] In *A Grain of Wheat*, a novel he published after *Weep Not, Child*, Ngũgĩ (2002) portrays the revivalist movement as preaching against involvement in politics and worldly affairs and as "the only organization allowed to flourish in Kenya by the government during the Emergency" (p. 83). The revivalists were seen as collaborators by the African nationalist movement and were attacked by the Mau Mau (p. 84).

In epic fashion, Isaka collectively blames the Kikuyu people for the colonial government's violent repression against them. This sermon produces different impressions on Njoroge and Mwihaki[7], who later discuss their differing viewpoints. Both children are shaken by the prospect of waking up "to find everything gone – all destroyed" (Ngũgĩ, 1987, p. 93). However, Mwihaki is more inclined to believe Isaka's message, which shows in her tentative statement to Njoroge, "you know I think the people have sinned" (p. 94). Njoroge is more doubtful: "he was inclined to agree with the teacher. But he did not like the teacher's voice as he cried, 'Repent, you know. For the kingdom of God is near'" (p. 91). He goes on to ask Mwihaki, "Is it possible for a whole nation to sin?", to which Mwihaki replies, "'One man sins, God punishes all.' He thought: She is right, God had done this often to the children of Israel. But He always sent somebody to rescue them" (p. 95). Njoroge takes solace not in the millenarian vision of Isaka's revivalist teachings but in his own messianic readings of the Old Testament, drawing inspiration from "Samuel and many other prophets" (p. 95) as well as "David rescuing a whole country from the curse of Goliath" (p. 94). Although both students are overwhelmed by the apocalyptic vision of their teacher, Njoroge, nevertheless, is more inclined toward the anticolonial messianic tradition, a tradition associated in the novel both with Njoroge's autodidactic hermeneutic efforts and with the Mau Mau and the African national liberation movement in Kenya more generally (pp. 43, 57–58). Isaka is ultimately executed by the military during the emergency despite being adamant that he is not a Mau Mau member or sympathizer (p. 101), which can be seen as the author's ironic repudiation of Isaka's revivalist teachings (whose message is to shun involvement in efforts of political and social transformation) as being futile, at least in the earthly realm. Isaka's efforts to become a "good Christian" and renounce his earlier more worldly ways do not save him from colonial violence (p. 102).

6. Conclusion

In addition to highlighting the oppressive historical traits of colonial education (particularly its pedagogical practices and discourses, which are its instruments of domination), this novel offers

[7] This recurrent difference between Njoroge's and Mwihaki's respective responses to education (a difference which is also registered in the passage from the novel quoted in the beginning of this section) is concurrent with their differing class backgrounds. While Njoroge belongs to the African squatter class that works on settler-occupied land, Mwihaki's father, though an African himself, is an important landowner and a village chief who, alongside Mr. Howlands, a white settler, fights against the Mau Mau.

an alternative vision of education that emerges from a close examination of how students such as Njoroge engage with and respond to their education. This vision foregrounds the importance of finding ways to link language and literacy education with students' already existing cultural and linguistic repertoire. It also calls our attention to the need for students to read and interpret pedagogical and literary texts as a basis for engaging with and transforming their larger world. This alternative vision of education as a project of freedom is what has largely been overlooked by previous postcolonial readings of novels such as *Weep Not, Child*, which indicates the need for reexaminations inspired by approaches that center on student agency. It is here that I see the value of critical-pedagogy-inspired approaches as a compliment to the insights produced by Foucauldian and Saidian-inspired postcolonial approaches to the historical and literary examinations of colonial education systems.

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