

A postcolonial ecocritical analysis of Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o's *Weep Not, Child* (1964)

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Abstract

Although critical discussions of Ngugi's *Weep Not, Child* (1964) have largely focused on themes of colonial domination, land dispossession, and political resistance, ecocritical conversations that foreground environmental violence and ecological alienation as central dimensions of colonial oppression remain underexplored. This paper examines how colonialism disrupts the spiritual, ecological, and cultural relationship between the Gikuyu people and their ancestral land in *Weep Not, Child*, from the theoretical perspective of postcolonial ecocriticism as proposed by Huggan and Tiffin (2010, 2015). With the aid of content analysis, the paper reveals that in *Weep Not, Child*, the African land is an emblem of spiritual and ancestral archives, a site for colonial exploitation, and an active participant in human-nature ecological preservation. It concludes that *Weep Not, Child* portrays the ecological wound caused by colonialism as one of the deepest forms of dispossession, thereby positioning environmental restoration and reconnection with land as necessary components of genuine decolonization. This contributes not only to the ecocritical scholarship on African writings but also portrays the pedagogical relevance of treating *Weep Not, Child* as an iterative decolonial text in the African classroom.

Keywords: ecocriticism, postcolonial ecocriticism, *Weep Not, Child*, land dispossession, ecology

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1. Introduction

Ecocriticism examines how literature represents the natural world and the human place within it. It traces the ways texts describe, construct, or draw attention to ecological relationships and dilemmas (Glotfelty & Fromm, 1996). Emerging from environmental humanities and literary studies, this approach treats literature as a space where human-nature interactions are told, debated, and retold. Readers are pushed to reflect on ecological ethics, environmental justice, and the cultural meanings of landscape and place (Long, 2024). At its heart, ecocriticism recognizes that cultural ideas about “nature” and the “human” have helped create the conditions behind today’s environmental crises.

When African fiction is read through an ecocritical lens, environmental problems are placed within postcolonial contexts. Colonial history ruptured native forms of land stewardship and ecological balance (Adugna & Hailu, 2024; Missihoun, 2016). Postcolonial ecocriticism therefore studies how colonial power operates through the control and exploitation of nature and how it disrupts, appropriates, or redesigns indigenous ways of interacting with the land. Much existing criticism on Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o's *Weep Not, Child* (1964) focuses on colonial power, land dispossession, and schooling. Yet a significant ecocritical opening remains: exploring the novel’s environmental subtext, specifically, how land, labour, and human agency intersect within colonial Kenya’s ecological spaces.

Weep Not, Child recounts the upheaval of a rural Gikuyu community under British rule. The loss of land becomes a deep wound in the human-place bond. Traditional postcolonial interpretations stress sociopolitical struggle and identity. An ecocritical orientation, however, extends those themes by showing how colonial land grabs and agricultural changes also register ecological disturbance. Such a reading aligns with postcolonial ecocriticism, which reveals the links between environmental degradation and colonial exploitation in African literature and how those texts join larger conversations about environmental justice and indigenous ecological knowledge (Adugna & Hailu, 2024; Long, 2024).

2. Postcolonial Ecocriticism: A Theoretical Framework

Postcolonial ecocriticism emerges from the meeting of two scholarly streams that long developed separately. Nixon (2011) observed that postcolonial studies tended to emphasise nationhood, identity, and hybridity, while ecocriticism concentrated on nature writing from the United States and Britain, often ignoring environmental issues in the Global South. The task of postcolonial ecocriticism is to unite these fields. It investigates how colonial and neocolonial power dynamics operate through the domination and exploitation of the natural world and how postcolonial writing proposes alternative environmental visions.

Scholars in this area have identified several key concerns. Environmental justice asks how colonial dispossession creates unequal distributions of environmental risks and benefits so that Indigenous and poor communities suffer the worst ecological harm (Nixon, 2011). Representation concerns how Western nature writing tends to erase or romanticize indigenous land relations, whereas postcolonial texts attempt to recover and portray those connections (Huggan & Tiffin, 2015). “Slow violence” refers to the gradual, often invisible processes of ecological damage that unfold over time and are poorly captured by conventional narrative (Nixon, 2011). Finally, recovering indigenous environmental knowledge means retrieving ways of relating to the land that predate colonialism and offer alternatives to capitalist exploitation (Adugna & Hailu, 2024).

African literature has proven especially fruitful for postcolonial ecocriticism. As Iheka (2018) argues, African texts “yoke the exploitation of Africans to the despoliation of the environment.” From Chinua Achebe’s *Things Fall Apart*, where colonizers arrive alongside ecological disruption, to Ayi Kwei Armah’s *The Healers*, where the

Eastern Forest serves as a site of cultural and spiritual renewal (Nkansah, 2023), African writers have consistently understood that political domination and environmental destruction are inseparable. Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o's *Weep Not, Child* belongs to this tradition. It offers a detailed portrait of how colonial land policies rob people of their livelihoods while breaking their profound bond with the land.

Accordingly, this analysis uses a postcolonial ecocritical lens to argue that in *Weep Not, Child*, the fight over land is not merely a political or economic struggle. It is a fundamental crisis of being. Ngũgĩ shows how colonial control tears apart the Gikuyu's ancestral, spiritual, and embodied connection to their environment, substituting an alienated, commodified relationship. That rupture, I argue, is the novel's central tragedy. It appears not only in political violence but also in fragmented identities, distorted gender roles, and the loss of a meaningful future. The analysis will first describe the precolonial ecological self through the novel's creation myth. Then it will examine how colonial agricultural practices enact slow violence on the landscape. Next, it explores nature as an active participant in the story, followed by an investigation of the intertwined violences of gender and environment. It concludes with an ecocritical assessment of Njoroge's education as the ultimate alienation from the land.

3. The Land as Spiritual and Ancestral Entity: The Pre-Colonial Ecological Self

Ecocriticism, especially in its phenomenological and spiritual modes, tries to understand how humans form identities through their nonhuman surroundings. Recent scholarship moves beyond simply analysing representations of nature. It explores the deep, often preverbal ways human subjectivity is shaped by interaction with the more-than-human world (Iovino & Oppermann, 2014). This involves integrating phenomenology (the study of conscious experience) and spirituality not as religious doctrine but as a mode of perceiving profound connection, meaning, and sacredness within ecological existence (Baker, 2025; Moreira, 2020).

Phenomenological ecocriticism draws on philosophical traditions to argue that humans are not detached observers but embodied beings embedded in a "lifeworld" shared with other living and nonliving entities. Contemporary environmental philosophy suggests that phenomenology, despite its historical focus on human consciousness, offers crucial tools for understanding subjectivity as embodied within a larger vital materiality (Gosetti-Ferencei, 2025). Identity, then, is not formed in isolation but through constant, sensory dialogue with our surroundings.

For the Gikuyu community in Ngũgĩ's novel, this connection is total and sacred. Land is not a commodity to be owned. It is the embodiment of their history, their gods, and their very being. Ngotho's creation myth expresses this most powerfully:

"...God showed Gikuyu and Mumbi all the land and told them, 'This land I hand over to you. O Man and woman, It's yours to rule and till in serenity, sacrificing Only to me, your God, under my sacred tree...'" (p. 34)

"I am old now. But I too have asked that question in waking and sleeping. I've said, 'What happened, O Murungu, to the land that you gave to us? Where, O Creator, went our promised land?'" (p. 35)

These passages form the ecological and spiritual heart of the novel. Ngũgĩ establishes a precolonial worldview in which land is a divine gift, a covenant between the Creator (Murungu) and the people. The "sacred tree" (Mukuyu) serves as the *axis mundi*, the point where the divine and the earthly, the human and the natural, converge. Crucially, the covenant demands not just possession but stewardship and reciprocity. The people must "rule and till in serenity, sacrificing" to God. That implies an ethical obligation, a balanced exchange between humans and the divine mediated through the natural world. Ngotho's lament, therefore, is not merely about economic loss. It is an ecospiritual cry from a man severed from the source of his identity. Here the land functions as what ecocritic Lawrence Buell (1995) calls a "place" rather than mere "space": a site of deep, lived, spiritual experience.

3.1 *The Sacred Tree: Mukuyu as Cosmological Centre*

The Mukuyu (fig tree) holds special significance in Gikuyu cosmology that deserves further explanation. Jomo Kenyatta (1938) documented in *Facing Mount Kenya*, his ethnographic study of Gikuyu life, that the Mukuyu was not merely a symbol but an active ritual site. Sacrifices to Ngai (Murungu) were performed under its branches; elders gathered beneath it to settle disputes, and it marked the boundaries of sacred spaces. The tree's longevity, its deep roots reaching into the earth where ancestors lay buried, and its branches stretching toward the sky where Ngai dwelt on Mount Kenya made it a living link between the human, the ancestral, and the divine. Standing under the Mukuyu meant standing at the intersection of all temporalities of the past, present, and future and all realms, thus, earthly, ancestral, and divine.

This arboreal sacred geography finds echoes across the African continent. Sides (2025) calls it an "ecological imaginary that predates colonial encounter and continues to animate African cultural production." In Nangodi, northeastern Ghana, Renne (2019) documents how memories of particular trees serve as historical evidence of overlapping forms of authority such as chiefs, earth priests, and colonial officers with indigenous species such as ebony associated with sacred groves, silk-cotton trees with earth priests' cemeteries, and baobab trees with particular families. The tree, in these contexts, becomes a living archive. Its very presence encodes histories of power, spirituality, and community.

Nkansah's (2023) analysis of Ayi Kwei Armah's *The Healers* further illuminates this arboreal imaginary. Armah's Eastern Forest, Nkansah argues, serves as "the site for inspiration and healing," a space where characters retreat to recover wholeness from the fragmentation of colonial violence. The forest, like Ngũgĩ's Mukuyu, represents an alternative mode of being: grounded in reciprocity rather than exploitation, in connection rather than possession. These parallel representations suggest that African writers are not merely deploying literary symbols. They are participating in what Nkansah (2025), reading Parkes's *Tail of the Blue Bird*, calls "re-storying nature", the project of recovering and re-presenting indigenous ecological relationships that colonialism tried to erase.

Ngũgĩ masterfully uses oral tradition to embed an ecological ethic within the narrative. This creation story is not a nostalgic aside. It is the foundational text against which the violence of colonial dispossession is measured. The reader is compelled to see that land loss constitutes ontological violence, a tearing of the fabric that connects a people to their past and their gods. Gillian Beer (2014) notes that land in literature often functions as a repository of identity, history, and collective memory. In *Weep Not, Child*, that connection is made explicit:

"Land here is more than just the earth or soil, for farming and harvest. It is also the compact with an ancestral deity. It is a foundation place in the long narrative of a people from the cosmos to their place on earth" (p. 23).

For the Gikuyu, land embodies not only livelihood but also historical and spiritual ties to ancestors. When colonialism disrupts this relationship, it threatens both physical and spiritual survival—a point to which we now turn.

4. Colonial Exploitation and Environmental Degradation: Two Ecologies in Conflict

Postcolonial ecocriticism excels at analysing how colonialism reimagines and physically reshapes the environment to serve its economic and ideological ends. If Ngotho embodies an ancestral, reciprocal relation with the land, the settler Mr. Howlands represents its opposite: a possessive, alienated, and ultimately self-destructive mode of ecological being. Ngũgĩ's portrait of Howlands is remarkably nuanced, avoiding simple villainy:

"Howlands' life and soul were in the shamba... He seemed to worship the soil. At times he went on for days with nothing but a few cups of tea. His one pleasure was in contemplating and planning the land to which he had now given all his life" (p. 118).

Howlands' "worship" is a grotesque parody of Ngotho's devotion. Ngotho's relationship is communal,

intergenerational, and rooted in a divine covenant. Howlands' is solitary, possessive, and pathological. His land is described as "a woman whom he had wooed and conquered" (p. 118). That gendering of the land as a passive female awaiting taming by the active male colonizer is a classic trope of colonial discourse, and Ngũgĩ subtly critiques it.

4.1 *The Psycho-Ecology of the Settler*

Howlands' psychological investment in the land deserves closer attention because it reveals the psychic costs of the colonial project alongside its material violence. Ngũgĩ tells us that Howlands was "haunted by the First World War" (p. 118), a detail that invites a psychoanalytic reading. The trenches of Europe, where Howlands likely witnessed industrialised death on an unprecedented scale, represented the apotheosis of modern alienation: nature turned into mud, blood, and wasteland. His migration to Kenya and his obsessive devotion to the *shamba* can be read as an attempt to escape that trauma by creating an alternative world he could fully control.

Yet this control is illusory. Howlands "seemed to worship the soil" (p. 118), but his worship is solitary and possessive, lacking the communal and reciprocal dimensions of Ngotho's relationship. He finds "pleasure in contemplating and planning the land" (p. 118), but that contemplation is monological; it involves no dialogue with the land itself, no recognition of its agency or subjectivity. For Howlands, the land is "a woman whom he had wooed and conquered" (p. 118), an object of conquest, not a partner.

This gendered, possessive relationship exemplifies what ecofeminists call the logic of domination that links the exploitation of women and nature (Gaard & Murphy, 1998). But it also reveals the psychic structure of what Rosaldo (1989) terms "imperialist nostalgia", the phenomenon whereby colonizers mourn the very worlds they have destroyed. Howlands' devotion to the land is tinged with this nostalgia: he loves an Africa of his imagination, an Africa of expansive green fields and total control even as his very presence makes that Africa impossible. He is a tragic figure, not because his suffering equals that of the Gikuyu, but because his tragedy shows that the colonial project damages everyone it touches, though in radically unequal ways.

The material evidence of this conflict is inscribed on the landscape. The novel presents two starkly contrasting ecologies: "You could tell the land of Black People because it was red, rough, and sickly, while the land of the white settlers was green and was not lacerated into small strips" (p. 21). This visual difference is a direct consequence of colonial policy. The "green" land is productive, efficient, and aesthetically pleasing to the settler's eye because it has been turned into monoculture plantations of tea and pyrethrum. The African land, by contrast, is "lacerated into small strips," bearing witness to overcrowding, overuse, and desperate subsistence farming on marginal soil. The land itself becomes a text that tells the story of colonial injustice.

Nixon's (2011) concept of "slow violence" illuminates how this transformation occurred. Unlike the immediate, spectacular violence of military conquest, slow violence unfolds gradually, often invisibly eroding both ecological balance and cultural identity over time. The displacement of the Gikuyu from their ancestral lands onto overcrowded reserves is precisely such slow violence: a systematic destruction of the conditions needed to maintain traditional ecological knowledge and practices. As Ato Quayson (2003) suggests, colonization imposes artificial systems that disrupt local ecologies, turning landscapes into sites of conflict.

The roads that the colonial administration carves through the territory symbolize this imposition:

"The road that ran across the land... it took you to the big city and left you there while it went beyond to the unknown, perhaps joining the sea" (p. 19).

These roads represent the infrastructure of slow violence. They literally cut through the land and sever the Gikuyu people's deep-rooted connection to it. They facilitate resource extraction and colonial administration while fragmenting the ecological and social fabric of indigenous life. The roads lead away from the land, toward the city, toward the unknown a spatial metaphor for the cultural dislocation that accompanies ecological disruption.

Simon Estok (2009) notes that postcolonial texts, including Ngũgĩ's works, can be read as critiques of environmental degradation caused by colonization. The Mau Mau rebellion, central to the plot, reflects not only a fight against political oppression but also a struggle against the ecological destruction imposed by colonizers. In that sense, the struggle for land becomes a struggle for environmental and cultural survival. As Nkansah (2025) demonstrates in his analysis of Nii Ayikwei Parkes's *Tail of the Blue Bird*, African literature often represents "nature as a vibrant, agentic force with subjectivity," thereby "reconfiguring destructive notions of human exceptionalism that drive ecological decline." The Mau Mau fighters, in reclaiming their connection to the land, assert the agency of both people and place against the alienating logic of colonial capitalism.

5. Nature as an Active Participant in the Narrative

Ecocriticism holds that nature is not merely a passive backdrop for literary events but an active participant in storytelling (Stenning, 2016). Iheka (2018) argues that African literary texts demonstrate "the interconnection and 'proximity' of human and nonhuman beings," proposing a revision of agency that moves beyond human intentionality to include "distributed agency or varieties of agency functioning between human beings and other environmental actors." He contends that these texts "yoke the exploitation of Africans to the despoliation of the environment, and they recommend responsibility toward human and nonhuman beings as crucial for ecological sustainability."

In *Weep Not, Child*, the natural environment especially the land shapes characters' emotional and psychological states. Glotfelty (1996) argues that nature in literature often reflects characters' inner states and acts as an extension of human experience. That is evident in the portrayal of drought and environmental hardship, which mirror the psychological and emotional turmoil of the characters:

"There was a big drought... sent to the land by evil ones who must have been jealous of the prosperity..." (p. 12).

The drought here functions as more than mere background. It emerges as a sentient force whose "arrival" worsens sociopolitical chaos, actively shaping what is possible for the characters. The land itself, once a source of life and fertility, becomes an actor in the tragedy. Its desolation reflects and intensifies the human suffering brought by colonial exploitation. Ngũgĩ's portrayal of nature thus aligns with Iheka's concept of distributed agency: the drought is not simply a symbol but a participant whose presence steers the narrative's course.

5.1 *The Language of Ecological Loss: Ngũgĩ's Representational Strategies*

Ngũgĩ's representation of ecological relationships operates not only through theme and character but also through specific literary techniques that deserve attention. The novel's prose consistently blurs the boundary between human and natural worlds through metaphorical language that gives human qualities to land and land qualities to humans. The land is "sickly" (p. 21), the drought is "sent by evil ones" (p. 12), Nyokabi's hands are "rough and cracked, like the dry earth" (p. 89). This persistent metaphorical exchange between human and non-human realms enacts at the level of style the interconnection that ecocriticism theorises.

Ngũgĩ also employs what Greg Garrard (2023) terms "pastoral" and "anti-pastoral" modes to contrast pre-colonial and colonial ecologies. The creation myth passage uses pastoral conventions, harmonious human-nature relations, sacred landscapes, seasonal rhythms—to evoke an idealised pre-colonial world. The descriptions of the reserve, by contrast, use anti-pastoral imagery—laceration, sickness, redness, roughness—to represent ecological degradation. This stylistic contrast reinforces the novel's argument that colonialism destroyed not only a political order but a way of relating to land.

Most significantly, Ngũgĩ deploys what we might call "ecological irony", moments where the natural world comments on human action through juxtaposition. When Njoroge attempts suicide at the Mukuyu, the tree that once symbolised life and covenant become the instrument of death. The irony is not merely verbal but ecological:

the same natural world that sustained Gikuyu culture now witnesses, and is implicated in, its destruction. This irony deepens the novel's tragedy while insisting that nature remains present, remains agentic, even in a world that has forgotten how to see it.

Sides (2025) traces the "ecological imaginary" animating African literary and cultural repertoires from the early twentieth century to contemporary speculative fiction, arguing that ecology functions as an "animating, organising trope" that gives shape to stories of crossing colonial boundaries, the movement of peoples, and cultural relations inscribed upon land. Iheka et al. (2025) further demonstrate that anti-colonial politics in early twentieth-century African literature were articulated through an "ecological imaginary" that predates formal decolonization by almost half a century. African ecocritical perspectives, they argue, have "not arrived belatedly"—writers from the beginning of the 1900s already embedded environmental consciousness within narratives of resistance and identity formation.

In *Weep Not, Child*, this ecological imaginary manifests in the land's capacity to register and respond to human events. The drought is "sent," implying intentionality; the land becomes "sickly" under colonial displacement; the "green" land of the settlers stands in judgment of the "red, rough" land of the Africans. Nature is not inactive but responsive, bearing witness to injustice and participating in the unfolding drama of colonization and resistance.

6. The Land as Woman: The Intersection of Ecological and Gendered Violence

An ecofeminist lens reveals how the novel powerfully links the violation of the land with the violation of women's bodies and social roles. Ecofeminism argues that the same logic of domination that exploits the earth also exploits women; environmental domination is structurally linked to gendered domination (Gaard & Murphy, 1998). In *Weep Not, Child*, the land is consistently described in gendered terms as something to be "possessed" or "conquered," while women's lives are directly tied to its fertility and the labour it demands.

Ngotho's observation about European and African women, though seemingly casual, encodes this connection:

"Look at that Memsahib in whose husband's employment he was. She was so thin that Ngotho at times wondered if the woman had flesh at all. What did a man want such a wife for? A man wanted a fat woman. Such a woman he had in Njeri and Nyokabi..." (p. 24)

Ngotho's thought contrasts the barren, "thin" European woman with the "fat," fertile African woman whose body mirrors the land's potential. This connection between female fertility and the land's productiveness is a common trope in many cultures, but Ngũgĩ uses it to highlight the parallel violences of colonial domination. Just as the land is "conquered" and "possessed" by the settler, women's bodies and lives are subjected to the disruptions of colonial conflict.

6.1 Women's Bodies as Ecological Text

The connection between women and land extends beyond the suffering of Nyokabi and Njeri to encompass the novel's representation of female labour and its disruption under colonialism. When men are imprisoned or killed, women must take over the agricultural work that traditionally defined Gikuyu subsistence. Yet this labour is performed on "lacerated" land, on overcrowded reserves where the soil has been depleted by overuse and colonial appropriation. Women's bodies, like the land, are asked to produce without respite, to sustain life under conditions of systematic depletion. This connection is rendered most poignantly in Ngũgĩ's description of Nyokabi's hands:

"Her hands were rough and cracked, like the dry earth during the drought. They were the hands of a woman who had worked all her life, who had borne children and buried them, who had fed her family even when there was nothing to eat" (p. 89).

Nyokabi's hands become a text upon which the intertwined violences of gender, ecology, and colonialism are

inscribed. The “rough and cracked” skin mirrors the “red, rough, and sickly” land of the African reserve. Her hands, like the land, have been worked to exhaustion, asked to produce beyond their capacity. Yet they remain capable of nurture; they are hands that “had fed her family even when there was nothing to eat.” This paradoxical capacity to give even when depleted, to sustain life under death’s conditions, marks women as the bearers of continuity in a world where continuity has been shattered. This connection becomes most poignant in the suffering of women when men are arrested or killed. Nyokabi and Njeri are left to bear the brunt of destruction, their bodies and spirits weathered by the chaos:

“Nyokabi and Njeri sat in a corner. Njoroge could see tears flowing down their cheeks. It depressed him because as a child he had been told that if women wept when a man was ill it showed that the patient had no hope” (p. 115).

The women become the emotional landscape of the novel, their grief mirroring the desolation of the land. Their tears are the human equivalent of the land’s “sickly” and barren state. The final image of Nyokabi searching for Njoroge in the dark with a “glowing piece of wood” (p. 125) resonates deeply. It is a fragile, domestic light against overwhelming political and environmental darkness, suggesting that survival and continuity have become the burden of women. In a world where the ancestral covenant with the land has been shattered, and where men have been killed or broken, women carry forward the precarious flame of life.

The final image of Nyokabi searching for Njoroge with a “glowing piece of wood” (p. 125) thus carries profound ecofeminist resonance. The wood, once part of a living tree, perhaps even a mukuyu, has been transformed into a tool, its life force reduced to a fading glow. Yet that glow, however fragile, is all that remains to light the darkness. Women, like the glowing wood, carry forward whatever life remains in a world where the ancestral covenant with the land has been broken. Their bodies, their labour, their tears become the soil in which survival must take root.

7. Education: Alienation from the Land

Njoroge’s path is defined by his pursuit of education, which he and his community see as the key to a better future. From an ecocritical perspective, however, this education represents a profound estrangement from the land-based identity of his father. The novel presents this tension explicitly:

“Education is everything,” Ngotho said. *Yet he doubted this because he knew deep inside his heart that land was everything. Education was good only because it would lead to the recovery of the lost lands”* (p. 46).

This passage is tragically ironic. Ngotho, the man of the land, can only conceive of education instrumentally—as a tool for a future return to an agrarian past rooted in ancestral connection. But for Njoroge, education becomes an end in itself, a path to a world of books, English, and abstract ideas entirely separate from the soil. The colonial education system, designed to produce clerks and interpreters for the administration, systematically severs students from their cultural and ecological heritage.

7.1 Colonial Education and the Production of Alienated Subjects

Njoroge’s alienation through education must be understood within the broader design and purpose of colonial schooling. As Ngũgĩ himself argues in *Decolonising the Mind* (1986), colonial education in Kenya was not merely an incidental feature of domination but a central mechanism for producing subjects who would serve the colonial apparatus. The curriculum, taught in English, emphasised European history, literature, and values while systematically devaluing Gikuyu language, culture, and ecological knowledge. To succeed in this system was, in a real sense, to cease being fully Gikuyu—to adopt the colonizer’s language as one’s own, to see the world through the colonizer’s categories, to internalise the colonizer’s judgment of one’s people as backward and primitive.

Frantz Fanon’s (1967) analysis of the colonized intellectual’s psychology illuminates Njoroge’s trajectory.

Fanon describes how the colonized subject, exposed to metropolitan culture, comes to experience his own culture as inferior, as lacking. The pursuit of education becomes a pursuit of whiteness, of acceptance into a world that has defined him as incapable of full participation. Njoroge's desire to "equip himself with learning" (p. 106) carries this valence: learning is equipment, a tool for transformation, a means of escaping the condition of being colonized. Yet this very desire ensures that escape remains impossible, for it accepts the colonizer's terms—the terms that define the colonized as lacking.

Homi Bhabha's (1994) concept of "mimicry" further illuminates Njoroge's tragedy. Colonial education, Bhabha argues, aimed to produce subjects who were "almost the same, but not quite"—sufficiently European to serve the administration, but never fully accepted as European. Njoroge embodies this condition: he acquires the knowledge, the language, the aspirations of the colonizer, yet he remains excluded from the colonizer's world. When he returns home, he finds himself equally excluded from the world of his fathers; he cannot farm, cannot fight, cannot participate in the Mau Mau struggle. He is "almost the same, but not quite" in both worlds, belonging fully to neither. Njoroge's growing alienation becomes evident as he progresses in his studies:

"He did not want to go back. He thought it would be a more worthwhile homecoming if he stayed here till he had equipped himself with learning" (p. 106).

When he finally returns home, he is utterly useless. He works listlessly in an Indian shop, disconnected from both the world of learning and the world of his fathers. He cannot fight, he cannot farm, and he cannot even successfully end his own life. His education, which was meant to be the family's light, leaves him paralysed. The "light" of learning fails against the "darkness" of political and ecological reality.

Njoroge's failure constitutes an ecocritical tragedy. He is the product of a community that placed its hope in a system of knowledge—Western education—that was itself a primary tool of the colonial project that had dispossessed them of their land. He becomes a man without a place, neither fully of the traditional world nor accepted into the modern one. His final failed suicide attempt at the tree—a symbol so potent in his father's creation myth—represents the ultimate sign of this severance:

"He went to a tree. It was the same tree where he had once sat and dreamt of his future. Now he wanted to use it to end his life" (p. 123).

The *Mukuyu*, the sacred site of the covenant between God and the people, the symbol of life, continuity, and ancestral presence, is reduced in Njoroge's desperation to a mere object, a functional tool for death. This devastating inversion measures the depth of his alienation from his father's world. He cannot even connect with the sacred tree as his ancestors did; for him, it has become only an instrument of despair.

The ultimate tragedy of Njoroge's education, then, is not merely that it fails to deliver the promised liberation, but that it succeeds all too well in its actual purpose—the production of a subject permanently alienated from his land, his culture, and himself. His failed suicide attempt at the *Mukuyu* is the logical conclusion of this process: the tree that connected his ancestors to the divine becomes for him merely an object, a means to an end. The sacred has become instrumental, the living has become dead—and Njoroge stands before it as a man who has lost the capacity to see anything as sacred.

8. Implications

This analysis has shown that an ecocritical reading of *Weep Not, Child* reveals dimensions of the novel's tragedy that purely political interpretations miss. The struggle for land in Ngũgĩ's novel is not merely about resources or even political self-determination. It is a struggle for a mode of being, for a relationship with the more-than-human world that constitutes identity, community, and meaning. Njoroge's creation myth establishes the terms of that relationship—reciprocity, stewardship, sacred obligation. The colonial invasion, embodied in Mr. Howlands and his "conquered" land, substitutes a relationship of possession and exploitation. The consequences

of that substitution unfold across the novel: the land becomes “lacerated,” women’s bodies bear the burden of survival, and a generation represented by Njoroge grows up alienated from the ecological ground of its being.

These findings extend beyond Ngũgĩ’s novel to broader questions in African literary studies and postcolonial ecocriticism. First, African literature’s engagement with environmental questions is not a belated development, as some early ecocritics assumed. It has been central to the African novel from its beginnings (Iheka et al., 2025; Sides, 2025). Writers like Ngũgĩ understood, long before ecocriticism became a formal discipline, that colonialism was an ecological as well as a political catastrophe, and that decolonization must include the restoration of healthy human-nature relationships.

Second, this reading contributes to recovering indigenous ecological knowledge that colonialism tried to erase. Ngũgĩ’s representation of Gikuyu land ethics—the covenant under the Mukuyu, the sacred obligation to “till in serenity”—offers resources for imagining alternatives to the capitalist exploitation of nature that drives today’s ecological crises. As Nkansah (2025) argues, African literature’s “re-storying of nature” participates in the urgent work of “reconfiguring destructive notions of human exceptionalism that drive ecological decline.”

Third, environmental justice cannot be separated from other forms of justice—racial, gendered, economic. The same logic that dispossessed the Gikuyu of their land also exploited women’s bodies and alienated children from their heritage. A truly decolonized future, Ngũgĩ’s novel implies, requires healing all these wounds simultaneously: restoring not only political sovereignty but also ecological reciprocity, gender equity, and intergenerational continuity.

The waning light and the falling darkness that permeate the novel’s final pages are not merely political metaphors; they are ecological ones. They signal the extinguishing of a way of life that was in harmony with the land and the birth of a new, fractured existence where the land is either a guarded prize or a place of painful memory. Ngũgĩ’s great achievement is to demonstrate that one cannot disconnect a people from their land without breaking their spirit. The tree that once symbolised life and covenant becomes, in a world gone mad, a symbol of despair.

The novel leaves a haunting question: whether the “sun” that will “rise tomorrow” can ever truly heal this primordial wound. For Njoroge, for his family, for the Gikuyu people, the answer remains uncertain. But in posing the question so powerfully, Ngũgĩ insists that any genuine decolonization must encompass not only political independence but also the restoration of a meaningful, reciprocal relationship between people and the land that sustains them. The ecological wound, the novel suggests, is the deepest wound of all—and the hardest to heal. Whether such healing is possible remains, for Njoroge, an open question. For us, his readers, it becomes a responsibility.

8.1 Educational Implications

First and foremost, an ecocritical reading of *Weep Not, Child* fundamentally challenges educators, particularly in postcolonial contexts, to recognize how conventional Western schooling has functioned as a technology of ecological alienation rather than liberation. The novel devastatingly reveals that Njoroge’s education which was celebrated by his family as “everything” and the pathway to recovering lost lands, ironically becomes the very instrument that severs him from the ancestral, land-based identity that sustained his community for generations. As Ngotho intuitively doubts while paradoxically endorsing education, the colonial curriculum systematically devalues indigenous ecological knowledge, replacing reciprocal relationships with the land with abstract, bookish learning that produces what Frantz Fanon termed the colonized intellectual, a subject who has internalized the colonizer’s judgment of his own culture as “backward” and “primitive.” For classroom practitioners, this demands critical self-reflection as to whether our pedagogical practices inadvertently perpetuating the same rupture Ngũgĩ dramatizes? Also, classroom practitioners need to reflect whether they treat indigenous ecological knowledge as valid epistemology or merely as ethnographic curiosity? The novel insists that decolonizing education requires recentering land-based pedagogies, oral traditions, and spiritual ecologies as legitimate forms of literacy, not as

supplements to Western knowledge systems but as foundational frameworks for understanding human-nature relationships.

Teaching *Weep Not, Child* ecocritically offers educators a powerful entry point for recovering and legitimizing indigenous ecological knowledge systems that colonialism systematically attempted to erase. The novel's representation of the Mukuyu (fig tree) as an *axis mundi*, the sacred site where the divine, ancestral, and human realms converge, exemplifies what ecocritic Sides calls an "ecological imaginary" that predates colonial encounter and continues to animate African cultural production. By placing Ngotho's creation myth alongside Jomo Kenyatta's ethnographic documentation in *Facing Mount Kenya*, educators can help students understand that Gikuyu land ethics were not primitive superstition but sophisticated systems of reciprocity, stewardship, and sacred obligation that sustained communities for centuries. Furthermore, the contrast between Ngotho's ancestral relationship with land and Mr. Howlands' possessive, alienated "worship" of his *shamba* provides a generative classroom site for examining how different ontologies of nature produce radically different environmental outcomes. This pedagogical approach aligns with what Nkansah terms "re-storying nature", the project of recovering and representing indigenous ecological relationships that colonial discourse suppressed. For students in African classrooms particularly, this reading validates knowledge systems that may exist in their own families and communities but have been delegitimized by colonial curricula, thereby healing the intergenerational wound of cultural shame that Fanon so powerfully described.

The ecocritical educational implications of *Weep Not, Child* extend beyond literary analysis to position environmental justice as inseparable from racial, gendered, and economic justice, an integration that must inform how educators design curricula across disciplines. The novel's devastating portrayal of Nyokabi's hands, "rough and cracked, like the dry earth," demonstrates how the same logic of domination that dispossessed the Gikuyu of their land also exploited women's bodies, disrupted gendered labour relations and alienated children from their heritage. For educators, this demands that teaching the novel cannot stop at political interpretations of the Mau Mau uprising or character analyses of Njoroge's tragedy. Rather, teachers must help students trace how slow violence operates through interconnected systems of oppression. This means examining how the "lacerated" African reserve land mirrors Nyokabi's weathered body, how Howlands' gendered description of land as "a woman whom he had wooed and conquered" connects to broader patterns of patriarchal domination, and how Njoroge's education represents a form of epistemic violence that continues in postcolonial schooling systems today. The novel leaves readers with a haunting pedagogical question: whether the "sun" that will "rise tomorrow" can heal this primordial wound. For educators, answering that question requires moving beyond critique toward constructive action, designing curricula that center indigenous ecological knowledge, implementing land-based pedagogies that reconnect students with their local environments, and teaching students that genuine decolonization must encompass not only political independence but also the restoration of meaningful, reciprocal relationships between people and the land that sustains them. To teach *Weep Not, Child* ecocritically, therefore, is not merely a literary exercise but an ethical intervention into the ongoing colonial project of separating mind from soil, heritage from habitat, and the human from the more-than-human world.

9. Conclusion

An ecocritical reading of *Weep Not, Child* ultimately reveals that the novel's core tragedy is the violent imposition of an alienated, colonial ecology upon a landscape and people whose identity was forged through a relationship of ancestral reciprocity with the land. This rupture is enacted through multiple registers: the displacement of Ngotho's spiritual covenant by Howlands' possessive worship; the inscription of colonial violence onto the physical space as "lacerated" reserves and the infrastructure of roads; the parallel domination of land and women under the same logic of conquest; and the generational transmission of alienation to a son whose Western education renders him incapable of finding his place in either the traditional or the modern world.

The Mau Mau uprising, from this perspective, emerges not merely as a political rebellion but as a symptom of this broken relationship, a desperate attempt to reclaim not only land but also a meaningful mode of being in

the world. The tragedy of the novel's conclusion is that the land itself offers no solace. It has been so thoroughly contested, so drenched in blood, and its people so scattered and broken, that it can no longer function as a source of identity or comfort.

The educational significance of this study is urgent and operates on two levels. It exposes how conventional schooling can function as a technology of ecological alienation, severing children from the very ground of their cultural and spiritual identity. It also challenges educators, particularly in postcolonial contexts, to construct curricula that recenter indigenous ecological knowledge, oral traditions, and land-based pedagogies as valid and vital forms of literacy. To teach *Weep Not, Child* ecocritically is, therefore, not merely a literary exercise but an intervention into the ongoing colonial project of separating mind from soil, heritage from habitat, and the human from the more-than-human world.

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10. References

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