Finding the “I” after Colonisation: Illusion, Incongruity, and Ipseity in *Midnight's Children* by Salman Rushdie and *Weep Not, Child* by Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o

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Countries, once colonised, can never return to be what they were; instead they must paint a new picture of themselves by taking bits and pieces, dots and dashes, from their mythical, regional and colonial origins and merging them into the image of what they will become. As one examines the past, it is as if one has stepped up to scrutinise a painting too closely: one sees the texture of the paint and the tiny details of the painter’s hand, but the illusion of a whole no longer holds and instead dissolves into a bizarre and random series of dabs and swirls. It becomes clear that what had once been perceived as a “reality” is, in fact, an illusion.

Salman Rushdie’s *Midnight's Children* and Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o’s *Weep Not, Child* are two novels that tell the story of this decolonisation process through the eyes of young boys, so as to show the illusions and incongruities of life. Both novels are written in the form of the European Bildungsroman—a story of a young hero’s coming of age while his country is suffering. Rushdie’s Saleem Sinai is born at the stroke of midnight on August 15, 1947, at the very moment when India gains her autonomy. A newborn who cannot yet focus, he sees only bits and pieces, flashes that come in and out of focus, so that each part of the world around him is
detached and separated from the whole. In a similar fashion, Ngũgĩ’s Njoroge grows up amidst the tumult of Kenya’s Mau Mau in 1952 that leads to the country gaining independence on December 12, 1963. These two stories underline the experiences of those who struggle to keep and maintain their own voice, ethnic identity, and self-worth, while trapped between two distinct and conflicting cultures. The tearing apart and putting back together of countries is incomprehensible and confusing to the boys, and both see the events as a series of fragmented dots and dashes, which create a series of scattered, dreamlike episodes. Words, stories, symbols, disparate events, myths and people are the dots and dashes—the reality of the dreamlike illusion that makes up these boys’ lives. These protagonists represent the people who, in the face of socio-political turmoil, strive for cultural and political emancipation from colonial bondage, and strive to separate themselves from the blurred edges and define their own reality.

In his essay, “The Child Hero,” L.N. Nwokora states that there are three main reasons an author might write through the eyes of a child: “The child’s innocence, his openness to every instinct and desire, his connivance with nature, his instinctive intransigence for purity and truth ... that the unreasoning attitude of the child, with whom the author often identifies himself, helps to rub off the sharp edge of the cruel experiences narrated in the book ... [the author can] hide perfectly behind his translucid frankness to relate whatever happens.”1 Children in their innocence have not yet learned to couch the grim reality of daily life in politically correct terms. The incidents are related as they happen in plain terms without rancour. Children do not hate by nature, they are taught to hate, and so the stories can be told in the sweet, naïve voice of the ideal world, while at the same time showing the incredible power of colonialism to erase, alter, divide and destroy an entire culture.

The children struggle the most because they are yet to form their true identity—their ipseity. Ipseity is not the “who” of someone, their identity, but the “what” and the “why.” Ipseity is a better term than identity because the latter is used to distinguish one person from another and has associations with the official requirements of “identification,” like being asked to present a passport or birth certificate in official situations. The word ipseity, by contrast, means both nature and self—the “soul” self. Contained within one’s ipseity are the teachings, both dogma and dharma, that have been passed down through the ages—mouth to ear. The vast majority of such teachings simply did not survive the impact of one culture crashing into another. Traditional cultures are swept away to make room for the colonising power’s policies.

Both of the boys’ fathers are killed, leaving them to emerge as the new
voice of the culture. In essence, the traditional cultural past has been killed. The wounds left by the resulting cultural rifts are gaping. Remnants of British rule included the Indian Civil Service (ICS), the 1,000 strong “heaven-born” group of administrators who ran the country. Jawaharlal Nehru, first Prime Minister of independent India, initially viewed the colonial civil service as an instrument of foreign domination and often ridiculed the ICS for its support of British policies. He noted that someone had once defined the Indian Civil Service, “with which we are unfortunately still afflicted in this country, as neither Indian, nor civil, nor a service.”

Disentangling the original culture from the culture that has been intertwined within it is often an emotional process full of anger and confusion. Prominent postcolonial theorist, Frantz Fanon, a Martinique-born French-Algerian psychiatrist, once wrote that “decolonization is always a violent phenomenon.” After years of oppression, it is not easy for a culture to emerge unscathed; it is not easy to redefine one’s indigenous creed and convictions. Time can’t simply be turned back, Saleem Sinai says, “because a nation which had never previously existed was about to win its freedom, catapulting us into a world which, although it had five thousand years of history, although it had invented the game of chess and traded with Middle Kingdom Egypt, was nevertheless quite imaginary.”

The novels focus sharply on the present moment and contain a macro view of the experiences of the boys: the loss of identity, the loss of culture, the loss of language, the loss of voice, even the loss of hope—leading to a population that is completely fragmented with no cohesive core. The country is incompatible with itself—it is incongruous. As Rushdie puts it:

One of the most absurd aspects of this quest for national authenticity is that—as far as India is concerned, anyway—it is completely fallacious to suppose that there is such a thing as a pure, unalloyed tradition from which to draw. ... The rest of us understand that the very essence of Indian culture is that we possess a mixed tradition, a mélange of elements as disparate as ancient Mughal and contemporary Coca-Cola American.

Rushdie explores this idea of fragmentation and incongruity throughout Midnight's Children. The rivalries between England and the Colony, between India and Pakistan, and between Muslims and Hindus, are mirrored in the rivalry between Shiva and Saleem. Saleem is a dreamer and many of his facts are false or illusory. He is trying to dream a new India into life: “In fact, all over the new India, the dream we all shared, children were being born who were only partially the offspring of their parents—the children of midnight were also the children of the time: fathered, you
understand, by history. It can happen. Especially in a country which is itself a sort of dream” (MC, 118). He stresses the idea that one is not capable of falling in love with the whole, but must rather fall in love with the pieces. When Adam Aziz, Saleem’s grandfather, meets his wife, he examines her bit by bit through a hole in a sheet. He falls in love with her in bits and pieces, and Amina Sinai is only able to fall in love with her husband by forcing herself to love his individual pieces. She does not love him as a whole, but as individual bits, in much the same way as perhaps India will have to learn to love itself through its own bits and pieces.

At the moment of independence the Indians are left, not only to try to find out who they are, but also to clean up the white man’s garbage, symbolised by the Sinais’ purchase of Englishman William Methwold’s Estate in Breach Candy, Bombay. Although quite affordable in a financial sense, the price they must pay to live in this house with all its Englishness, until the very hour of independence, is high. By the time that hour rolls around many of the foreign objects have become familiar—particularly the custom of drinking gin, which eventually sweeps Ahmed Sinai, Saleem’s father, into an alcoholic haze. Far from being the civilising influence its adjudicators claim it to be, the British presence was in many respects highly destructive. Many of their original traditions and ways of life, as well as their cosmologies—their concept of the universe, and of their place within it—were simply ignored or completely eradicated.

Issues of past injustices cannot simply be unravelled, but instead the country must pull pieces from the past to weave a new unified identity to create a brand for itself. Such a brand is the country’s flag, a symbol that will convey the country’s ideology to the rest of the world. Rushdie’s novel spends a lot of time discussing the colours of the flag as Saleem is being born. India’s new flag was made up of three colour bands: one of deep saffron, one white, and one of what is now called “India green,” which represent courage and sacrifice, peace and truth, and faith and chivalry respectively. On the Kenyan flag, black symbolises the majority and the indigenous people, red represents the bloodshed during the struggle for independence, and green stands for Kenya’s rich agricultural land and natural resources; the white stripes were added to symbolise peace and unity. The black, red, and white traditional Masai warrior’s shield and two crossed spears signify that all Kenyans are always ready to defend the independence for which they fought so hard.6 The colours, the symbols, and the meanings behind each flag are important decisions. They are ideals and tell the story of what these two countries want to become—the culture they want to embrace.

One method cultures have for reclaiming their traditions is the art of
storytelling. The keepers of the culture pass down history, beliefs, norms, values, customs, roles, language, dress, diet, wisdom, and expertise, through stories.

Thomas Hylland Eriksen has studied the difficulty ethnic groups have when trying to negotiate the physical and cultural boundaries of each identity. A common language, religion, social traditions, and a shared historical memory and place of origin may all be important foundations of ethnic unity. But trying to build an identity based on memory is like trying to build a house on quicksand. This illusion is acknowledged by each author through his characters: Rushdie’s Saleem says, “I told you the truth. … Memory’s truth, because memory has its own special kind. It selects, eliminates, alters, exaggerates, minimizes, glorifies, and vilifies also; but in the end it creates its own reality, its heterogeneous but usually coherent version of events; and no sane human being ever trusts someone else’s version more than his own” (MC, 229).

Rushdie's characters play with self-identity by changing their names (something which occurs seemingly at will) to suit the new personae they want to assume. Rushdie believes that “our names contain our fates; living as we do in a place where names have not acquired the meaninglessness of the West, and still more than mere sounds, we are also the victims of our titles.”7 Saleem's mother Mumtaz Aziz becomes Amina Sinai when she moves from being a black nobody to becoming a wealthy merchant’s wife, and his younger sister Jamila Sinai becomes the most popular singer in West Pakistan, changing her name to Jamila Singer to reflect her new identity—although as part of the process she now must keep her true identity covered at all times by a white veil. And then there is Narada/Markandaya, who can change sex at will, and Tai Bibi, the 512-year-old whore who has the ability to alter her body smell at will as well as mimic the smell of others. Naseem, Saleem's grandmother, transforms from a woman to a wizened Reverend Mother: Naseem Aziz had become a prematurely old, wide woman, with two enormous moles like witches’ nipples on her face; and she lives within an invisible fortress of her own making, an ironclad citadel of traditions and certainties (MC, 40). The last character who changes her name is Padma, Saleem's listener and later wife. Her name is associated with both cow dung and perfection—the lotus grows out of the muck and blossoms into something sacred. Often identity is not only about how other individuals or groups see and define the culture, but about how individuals or groups see and define themselves. Padma does not become grotesque, but instead stays pure and perfect—the pink lotus is the solar emblem of perfection. Saleem becomes purified, and in his purified state now meets his match, Padma, whom he marries in
an achievement of perfect harmony.

It is not just the characters in the novels who change their names to assume a new identity; Rushdie and Ngũgĩ themselves underwent transformations through name changes in their own histories. Rushdie was born Ahmed Salman Rushdie to parents who had also changed their names. Rushdie wrote in his 2012 memoir that his father was born Khwaja Muhammad Din Khalique Dehlavi, and decided to change his name to Anis Ahmed Rushdie because of his admiration for the twelfth-century Spanish-Arab philosopher Ibn Rushd, also known in Europe as Averroes (MC, 258).

Salman Rushdie, who always went by his middle name, changed his name to Joseph Anton while in hiding in Britain. The name he chose to represent himself combined the first names of two famous authors: Joseph Conrad and Anton Chekhov, thus creating a persona for himself that he would later take on.

James Ngũgĩ rejected his Christian name in favour of a Gĩkũyũ name, and after starting his writing career in English, switched to the Gĩkũyũ language. He says, “I came to reject the name because I saw it as part of the colonial naming system when Africans were taken as slaves to America and were given the names of the plantation owners. I began to reject the name James and to reconnect myself to my African name which was given at birth, and that's Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o, meaning Ngũgĩ, son of Thiong'o.”

This was in effect to claim his true identity, his ipseity: not his given identity, but his soul, to do away with the duality, the rivalry within himself of the two cultures that he grew up in and merge them into one of his own choosing.

As a country goes through the throes of decolonisation, it might not notice the world is watching. Both repulsive and riveting, “the other” cannot help but gawk in curiosity and wonder as the two-headed monster thrashes about in its own agony as it tries to reject a vital organ it did not need, but now must live with—an appendage that cannot be cut out or off. Saleem is grotesque to others and to himself, a hideous child born of the cross-breeding of the Anglo-Indians. The Anglo-Indians are people with mixed blood descending from the British on the male side and the Indians on the female side. Saleem says, “it took me a little while to realise that my picture of myself was heavily distorted by my own self-consciousness about my appearance; so that the portrait I sent across the thought-waves of the nation, grinning like a Cheshire cat, was about as hideous as a portrait could be, featuring a wondrously enlarged nose, a completely non-existent chin and giant stains on each temple. It's no wonder that I was often greeted by yelps of mental alarm” (MC, 74). Through Saleem Sinai’s grotesque appearance, Rushdie is able to show just how complex and multifaceted India is at the time of its independence and how monstrous the
child is that has been birthed by both Britain and India.

Methwold, the Englishman, is Saleem's biological father. He is said to be a direct descendant of William Methwold (c. 1590–1653), the historic Englishman who planned the city of Bombay, and this is significant in the novel because Saleem, an Anglo-Indian, symbolises the new India, which has been born from the British Raj coupled with Mumbadevi. Saleem's biological mother, Vanita, dies during labour. Mary Pereira, the Catholic servant and midwife, exchanges the babies (Saleem and Shiva) at birth, causing Saleem to be raised Muslim instead of Hindu. She acts as Saleem's ayah and surrogate mother during the course of the novel, and later becomes Mrs. Braganza, a name borrowed from Catherine of Braganza, the Portuguese princess and wife of Charles II who brought Bombay to the English in 1662 as part of her dowry.

Much like the Anglo-Indians, Kenya also has its pariah. The children, born of African mothers and Italian prisoners of World War I, "were ugly and some grew up to have small wounds all over their body and especially around their mouth so that flies followed them all the time and at all places. Some people said it was punishment [for sleeping] with white men who ruled them and treated them badly." This hideous child symbolises the evils of European colonisation, which weakens and sickens the indigenous population.

Worse than the hideous child are the Africans in the novel who adopt the lifestyle of the colonialists and begin to behave as harshly and brutally as a white man:

All white people stick together. But we black people are very divided. .... Blackness is not all that makes a man. ... There are some people, be they black or white, who don't want others to rise above them. They want to be the source of all knowledge and share it piecemeal to others less endowed. That is what's wrong with all these carpenters and men who have certain knowledge. It is the same with rich people. A rich man does not want others to get rich because he wants to be the only man with wealth. ... Some Europeans are better than Africans. ... That's why you at times hear father say that he would rather work for a white man. A white man is a white man. But a black man trying to be a white man is bad and harsh. (WNC, 75)

Here, Ngũgĩ points out that cruelty is not limited to the colonialists or Europeans, but also shows that those who adopt the beliefs of the coloniser are capable of inflicting the pain by themselves on themselves, and that on several occasions, in order to please their masters, those who pretend to have the masters' “colour and manners” go to the extreme in
their maltreatment of their very own tribesmen. It is estimated that the Mau Mau killed at least 2,000 Kenyan civilians. The British and Kenyan militant units killed 20,000 Mau Mau rebels in combat, hanged over 1,000 suspected Mau Mau supporters, and interned more than 70,000 Kikuyu civilians. Will the Mau Mau's killing of its own people become part of the story or will it be swept away like dust sweeping across the Italian road?

But black on black violence is not the only violence the Kenyan has to endure. There is the psychological violence that directly impacts a person’s ipseity. Threats, intimidation, and shaming are used to undermine and cause damage to a culture’s identity.

From the first page of the novel, Njoroge and his family long for him to go to school and get an education. His mother, Nyokabi, had no stronger desire than to see him educated: “It did not matter if anyone died poor provided he or she could one day say: ‘Look, I’ve a son as good and as well educated as any you can find in the land’” (WNC, 16). His father, Ngotho, would be proud to say “Yes” when anyone asked him if he had sent his sons to school, as “[i]t made him feel almost equal to Jacobo” (WNC, 12). Jacobo owned the land on which Ngotho lived, was the village chief, and the only black landlord in the village. Ngotho was a “Muhoi,” a type of enslaved labourer similar to a serf, to Jacobo. All of Jacobo’s children attend school, including his young daughter, Mwihaki, who walks Njoroge to school on his first day. On his way to school he is accosted by a group of boys who called him a “Njuka.” Unaware of what this means, Njoroge is shocked and shamed by the incident, which shakes his high regard for the other school boys. It is not until later that Njoroge learns that “Njuka” is the name given to a newcomer. Although he greatly admires Mwihaki, and later comes to love her, one day while out walking, he feels so ashamed to be wearing his native garb—“nothing but a[n old] piece of calico” (WNC, 3)—instead of the standard Western shorts and shirt, that he avoids her and hates himself for his shame at the only garb he has worn since birth: “For a time he was irresolute and hated himself for feeling as he did about the clothes he had on” (WNC, 20). And although he tries hard and wants more than anything to learn, one sees his utter humiliation in his inability to speak and understand English correctly. Ngũgĩ spends many pages showing the class conflict between the native children who speak Swahili and the white teacher as they struggle to learn and understand the complexity of the English language.

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 and lazy fools. 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. (WNC, 48)

Simon Gikandi, as reported by Robert Elliot Fox, argues that “[i]f English is the medium of the colonised mind, the decolonising [of] the mind necessitated the jettisoning of English. Ngũgĩ at the time was writing in English under his Christian name. Ngũgĩ 's view of language, Gikandi argues, became tied to ‘a theory of identity and social consciousness which, in its nativism, ignores historicity and social agency.”

Gikandi shows, both through Njoroge and Ngũgĩ, the incongruity of trying to save one culture by adopting the teachings of another. According to Ngũgĩ this process of sending children to school to learn in English is an act of collective psychic suicide, producing an entire generation of bourgeois Africans who view their own languages as “shameful,” “inelegant,” “incapable of expressing scientific or intellectual thought,” and too crude to be exported to other lands. “Language is more than just a means of communication; it is the essence of our being, the very core of our soul as an African people, the medium of our memories, the link between space and time, the basis of our dreams.” Ngũgĩ continues: “[T]he passionate search for a national culture, which existed before the colonial era, finds its legitimate reason in the anxiety shared by native intellectuals to shrink away from that Western culture in which they all risk being swamped. Because they realise they are in danger of losing their lives and thus becoming lost to their people, these men renew contact once more with the oldest and most pre-colonial springs of life of their people.”

Rushdie attended British schools, and migrated to England in his mid-twenties, which inevitably westernised his perspective. He states that postcolonial Indian writers who have migrated away from India “are capable of writing from a kind of double perspective: because they … are at one and the same time insiders and outsiders in this society.” India has over a thousand languages, but the most widely used languages are Hindi and English, with the latter being the primary language for business and education. This situation produces a sort of double vision of the country. Rushdie explains the process in *Midnight’s Children* as if Saleem is receiving some kind of encrypted message tapped out in Morse Code. He says, “often times it begins with the dots and dashes: What had been (at the beginning) no bigger than a full stop had expanded into a comma, a word, a sentence, a paragraph, a chapter; now it was bursting into more complex developments, becoming, one might say, a book—perhaps an
encyclopedia— even a whole language” (MC, 274). Saleem had “a headful of gabbling tongues” (MC, 185). These are the voices of the “Midnight’s Children,” the 1,001 children born in the first hour of Indian independence. There are so many voices crying out to be heard, it is hard to hear any of them. As Patrick Colin Hogan writes, “the children of midnight are 1001 imaginative possibilities that are gradually impossibilized [sic] in the actual history of independent India.”

The voices seem to turn on each other and, rather than pulling the country together, they begin to tear it apart and gradually, one by one, destroy each other. The battle between Saleem, who represents creation, and his arch-rival, Shiva, who represents destruction through death and transformation, encapsulates the major conflicts of the country that must decide both how to define itself and which path it should follow. What will live and what will die? It must decide between the ancient and the modern: the India that existed for 6,000 years before its independence, and the India that will emerge. It must decide how to interpret and codify the myriad voices into one cohesive whole.

When one sees the complex and kaleidoscopic nature of these countries, and the difficulty of sorting out what is real from what is not, the reader recognises the immense challenge that lies ahead as they begin again to rework and refine their new creation myths. As they do so, stories will be told that contain both fact and illusion, truth and fiction, detail and deception.

Stories can be altered by the teller. They can be shaped and twisted to fit the situation and the idea the narrator wants his listener to remember. Rushdie warns the reader not to swallow everything whole, but to keep in mind that things are being divulged in bits and pieces. Throughout the story, Saleem’s listener Padma frequently expresses doubt and frustration at Saleem’s narration. In the experience of ipseity, the absolute truth of being, duality ends as we perceive that the identity and nature of everything, including ourselves, is inseparable from everything. Everything is the radiance of absolute ipseity, just as light is the radiance of the sun, but one can never truly say what that “everything” is because it is always shifting, changing, and transforming. An important deceptive detail in the story is the description of Mahatma Gandhi’s assassination when Saleem says, “rereading my work, I have discovered an error in chronology. The assassination of Mahatma Gandhi occurs, in these pages, on the wrong date.”

As Vishnupriya Sengupta points out:

Time and again, Rushdie points at fragments, fissures, perforations, and cracks, denoting the ambiguous nature of history and reality, difficult to capture sequentially in terms of causal relations. History consists of a terrain of consciousness, of fragments of memory, of
confused identity and role play, of the setting and backdrop reflecting the inner chaos. There is the autobiography of the narrator, biography of his kin, wider outer realities stretching through time and space, criss-crossing into a world where fantasy and reality, myth and fact, reinforce each other and eventually prove that we live in a world of cosmic illusion, of maya, of illusory maps, of illusory love, public history and private memory.19

The private memories were contained in the stories of the tribes. Story telling was valued in Njoroge's family, so much so that although he feared his father he relished listening to him tell stories. The stories illustrated how the people came to be given the land by the Creator, and prophesied that it would soon be returned to them. But all of this is simply forgotten when Njoroge, under duress to recite a story in class, loses it as if he had never heard it (WNC, 17). For the elders the illusion is that the land will magically be restored, and so they wait while doing nothing, but Njoroge's oldest brother Boro—one of the young men who had come home from the war to a life of dispossession (“no longer a boy, but a man with experience and ideas” [WNC, 27]), are furious at the inaction and reject the prophecy—stands up to his father, saying “to hell with the prophecy” (WNC, 27). Boro represents the generation who went to war and came back to unemployment and idleness. Many of these young men spent their days loitering around the shops hoping to pick up enough work to earn a meal: “At times they called themselves young Hitlers” (WNC, 8). They are angry and had been trained to fight. Ultimately it is Boro's generation who go into politics in support of Jomo Kenyatta, “the Black Moses.” Tired of waiting and doing nothing, they call for an immediate strike and after that fails, they rise up against the white people in violence forming the Mau Mau to unite against the white man.

While in school, Njoroge and Mwihaki learn of another prophecy, this time the Christian version in which all humanity would be destroyed through “war, diseases, pestilence, insecurity, betrayal, family disintegration” (WNC, 99). Both adolescents are deeply afraid of the prophecy and try to comfort each other. While visiting Mwihaki at her home one evening, Jacobo sits next to Njoroge and tells him: “It is you who must work and rebuild the country.” Njoroge takes this as another prophecy: “[H]e felt a bit awed to imagine that God may have chosen him to be the instrument of his Divine Service” (WNC, 102). Inspired, he remembers David standing up against Goliath and thus saving his country, and states: “Peace will come to this land” (WNC, 104). But then Ngugi, just like Rushdie before, cautions us that “Njoroge had always been a dreamer, a visionary who consoled himself, faced by the difficulties of the moment, by looking towards a better
day to come" (WNC, 175). Here we are again faced with the fallibility of the narrator, a young boy who had not yet come to terms with his own desires and fears. "He did not know that this faith in the future could be a form of escape from the reality of the present" (WNC, 121). Meanwhile, while Njoroge was dreaming of saving his country, his brother, Boro, was taking action through the Mau Mau uprising. Boro’s mission to fight for freedom and to regain the land slowly transforms into one of revenge: “The lost land will come back to us maybe. But I’ve lost too many of those whom I love for land to mean much to me” (WNC, 111). Freedom itself, we are told, is an illusion (WNC, 112). It is meaningless because it can’t bring back those who have fallen in its name. As Nicholas Kamau-Goro states: “The resistance … unfolds simultaneously as a struggle against colonialism and also an epistemological conflict between the older and younger generation over the exact meaning of the ancient prophecy.”

When Njoroge goes off to high school, the family still believes that it is he who will do something worthwhile and be a credit to the family. “Somehow Gĩkũyũ people always saw their deliverance as embodied in education. … He was no longer the son of Ngotho, but the son of the land” (WNC, 115). Njoroge is still sure that he is to be the saviour, now not just of the family land, but the whole country. When Mwihaki confronts him saying: “You are always talking about tomorrow, tomorrow. … What is tomorrow?”, he says, much as his father Ngotho might have done, “[j]ust stop for a moment, Mwihaki and imagine” (WNC, 117). It is when he is in high school that Njoroge meets Stephen Howland, son of the great white landowner, and he learns that, just as he had hidden from Mwihaki, Stephen hid from him:

“I used to hide near the road. I wanted to speak to some of you”

“Why didn't you?”

“I was afraid.”

“Afraid?” (WNC, 120)

Njoroge was confused that a white man would be afraid of him. He understands the incongruity of fear; that they in fact were both equally afraid of each other. “It's strange. It's strange how you do fear something because your heart is already prepared to fear” (WNC, 121). Fear is everywhere. In the letters he gets from Mwihaki she says: “Fear is in the air. Not a fear of death—it's a fear of living. I'm telling all this to show you how glad I am at the prospects of escaping it” (WNC, 123).

Njoroge is safe in his Christian paradise where Whites and Africans alike could work side by side as equals: “Njoroge at times wished the whole
country was like this. This seemed like a paradise, a paradise where children from all walks of life and of different religious faiths could work together without any consciousness” (WNC, 125). But his peace is not to last and he is quickly drawn from his safe paradise into the brutal reality of the Mau Mau when he is taken by the two European Officers to the homeguard post know as the “House of Pain” and beaten into a coma. The next day he finds out that Mwihaki’s father, Jacobo, has been murdered, and in an attempt to find the murderer, they have castrated his father, Ngotho, and now threaten to emasculate him. Christianity and education are shown as illusions that will not protect him from colonial violence. Shortly thereafter, Njoroge tries to find his own courage to confront the ghost of Jacobo who haunts his every waking hour, but when he gets to Mwihaki’s house, instead of courage he falls back on his desire to escape. His father’s ultimate death turns his world upside down and brings him face to face with the present he cannot confront. “Life seemed like a big lie where people bargained with forces that one could not see” (WNC, 138). Having lost his education, he is left to work for the Indian shopkeepers. He, who the whole village had once thought would be their saviour, is now condemned to serve women behind a shop counter. All his illusions are shattered and he tells Mwihaki at their last meeting, “I know that my tomorrow was an illusion” (WNC, 145). When she reminds him that the sun will rise tomorrow he replies: “All that was a dream. We can only live today” (WNC, 146). Mwihaki rejects his plan to run away with her, stating that they now have a duty to the country, and in despair he takes a folded cord and slings it over the branch of a nearby fig tree. When, at the end of the novel, Njoroge does not hang himself from the fig tree, the text continues:

But as they came near home and what had happened to him came to mind, the voice again came and spoke accusing him: You are a coward. You have always been a coward. Why didn’t you do it?

And loudly he said, “Why didn’t I do it?”

The voice said: Because you are a coward.

“Yes," he whispered to himself. “I am a coward.” (WNC, 148)

A reader may think that Njoroge condemns himself with this declaration. However, if one looks back at a passage earlier in the book, one finds that the idea of cowardice is defined as a form of resistance. When identifying the Indians as “white black people,” Ngũgĩ writes: “[S]o that when the white black people had been conscripted into the army the Indians had utterly refused and had been left alone. … This showed that the Indians were cowards. The Africans were inclined to agree with this idea of Indian cowardice” (WNC, 8). Suicide has often been thought of as the ultimate act
of cowardice and escape. Njoroge begins the novel with great hopes, dreams and aspirations, but slowly each is stripped from him. Readers may feel devastated and a deep sense of despair at the end of the novel, as Njoroge declares that “I have now lost all, my education, my faith and my family” (WNC, 144), experiencing a loss of faith in all the things he had earlier believed in, like wealth, power, education, and religion (WNC, 147). He was to be their saviour, but ends up with a noose in his hands. His naiveté and idealism about the future are taken away one by one: first the education that he had such hope would get his family back their land, then his faith, then his father, and then his love, and almost, at the end, his life.

Frustration and failure abound in both novels, as these young boys journey into manhood. Both novels are bleak and bitter. It is as if Ngũgĩ must painfully detach Njoroge from his embedded Western beliefs, must rip away all his illusions, so that he can truly see his own self, he “who had avoided his responsibility for which he had prepared himself since childhood” (WNC, 148). But the things that Njoroge has lost are not the things that are important to the Gĩkũyũ people—they are Western beliefs. The Gĩkũyũ people have long revered and worshipped the fig tree, the land, and the family as sacred, and all those things still stand. Njoroge hears many voices: “[T]he voices in his head that condemn him, the voice of duty to the future of the country from Mwihaki, and the voice of concern from his mothers. He was the only man left in the family, and the two women were out in search of a son. … He felt only guilt, the guilt of a man who had avoided his responsibility for which he had prepared himself since childhood” (WNC, 148). The voice of his mother calling him changes him from a child to a man.

Njoroge sees the “glowing piece of wood which [his mother] carried to light the way” (WNC, 148), and at that moment he recognises that he is no longer a child, but a man who has the responsibilities of his two mothers (perhaps a symbol of both countries’ impact upon him). Without a man in the household, the mothers have no status. Houses were identified with women, although women inherited neither houses nor land; access to housing therefore mainly existed through male relatives (husbands, brothers and sons). Inheritance was also patrilineal. Sons inherit cattle and other forms of wealth, as well as rights to the land of the father’s gunda, from their father. A woman generally does not inherit wealth from her father or husband: the property of the husband passes to his brothers, so these two mothers would have been homeless and penniless without Njoroge to protect them. That is perhaps why, in his dying breath, Ngotho pleads with Njoroge to look after them. And at the end of the novel Njoroge does gain a sense of ipseity. He knows he must take care of his mothers and that is
exactly what he does. He runs to open the door for them, knowing full well his role and identity now that he is a man. Njoroge is alive. Njoroge is a man. He says, “sunshine always follows a dark night. We sleep knowing and trusting that the sun will rise tomorrow” (WNC, 95). Much as the tree of life grew out of the darkness, Njoroge has sprouted and will grow. This time the sun shall not rise over the British Empire, but over the land of the people—the Kenyan people.

Both stories are an attempt by their authors to make a reality out of these dreams, to somehow codify the dots and dashes into a language that speaks for their respective countries, to solve the incongruities, and to find the key that will decipher their conventional identities. Rushdie explains reality in terms of perspective and time. In his novel, reality is a question of perspective: the further one gets from the past, the more concrete and plausible it seems; but as one approaches the present, it inevitably seems incredible (MC, 189). Rushdie’s Saleem says:

Who what am I? My answer: I am the sum total of everything that went before me, of all I have been seen done, of everything done to me. I am everyone everything whose being-in-the-world affected was affected by mine. I am anything that happens after I’ve gone which would not have happened if I had not come. Nor am I particularly exceptional in this matter; each “I,” every one of the now-six-hundred-million-plus of us, contains a similar multitude. I repeat for the last time: to understand me, you’ll have to swallow a world. (MC, 434)

Njoroge is his older brother Boro, his father Ngotho, and all the men who have come before him. He is at once the past, the present, and the future. In the end these works are not simple works of fiction, not mere stories, but heartfelt outpourings of each country’s child longing to define what is real, longing to give definition to the confusion and incongruities, longing for something that is long lost in a blur of distance. After their lives have been lived in their entirety the whole picture is clear: much like looking at an artwork from a distance, one does not see the individual brushstrokes, but rather the mirage of something complete, as each brushstroke is blended together to make a whole.
NOTES


3 Frantz Fanon, Black Skin, White Masks (New York: Grove, 1967), 236.

4 Salman Rushdie, Midnight’s Children (New York: Random House, 1981), 150. Midnight’s Children will be referenced parenthetically in-text with the abbreviation MC.


7 Rushdie, Imaginary Homelands, 348.


10 Ngũgĩ wa Thiong’o, Weep Not, Child, 24. All following references to Weep Not, Child will follow parenthetically in-text with the abbreviation WNC.


14 Ibid.

15 Rushdie, Imaginary Homelands, 19.


18 Ibid., 198.


20 Nicholas Kamua-Goro, “African Culture and the Language of Nationalist Imagination: The Reconfiguration of Christianity in Ngũgĩ wa Thiong’o’s The River