

The SPL Journal of Literary Hermeneutics

A Biannual International Journal of Independent Critical Thinking
Double-blind Peer-reviewed and Open Access Journal in English



Volume 4 Issue 1 Winter Edition 2024 e-ISSN 2583-1674 Page no. 181-193

www.literaryherm.org
www.cavemarkpublications.com



A Panoramic View of Ngugi Wa Thiongo's *Weep not, Child*

Archana Gupta

ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-5435-8767>

A. Babu Rajendra Prasad,

ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-2394-244X>

Corresponding Author: Archana Gupta, Assistant Professor, Amity School of Languages, Amity University, Lucknow Campus, agupta2@lko.amity.edu

Review Article

Keywords:

Mau Mau Movement, Guerilla Warfare, Postcolonialism, Mimicry, KAU

Article History

Received:

March 12, 2024

Revised:

March 28, 2024

Accepted:

March 30, 2024



ISSN 2583-1674 (SPL-JLH)



Abstract

Aim: *In this paper, the aim is to identify various issues like mimicry, resistance, rebellion, and victory etc. which define a typical postcolonial text in Ngugi Wa Thiongo's Weep Not Child. Ngugi highlighted the Mau Mau rebellion in Kenya, its causes, its militants' participation in Guerilla warfare, and the consequences of the Mau Mau movement. He makes a brilliant amalgamation of history and fiction. Weep Not, Child is written at the very beginning of Ngugi's career. He himself has been a witness to the effects of colonization in Kenya which he brings to the center in the novel.*

Methodology and Approach: *The authors have consulted the primary and secondary sources as part of their research. Further the researchers have applied the postcolonial theory in this work with the intention of bringing out the perspectives of both the colonizer and the colonized. In addition, the online material pertaining to the impact of colonialism on the psyche of the colonized has been discussed in detail in this research paper.*

Outcome: *Through this paper, the researchers have found that the pain pertaining to the trauma of colonialism continues to linger on long after the colonial era has come to an end. The researcher also wish to pin point the fact that special attention must be given to postcolonial studies to cement the relations between the colonizer and the colonized.*

Conclusion and Suggestions: *Though the era of colonialism has come to an end, imperialism has taken over from colonialism. Economic sanctions are imposed on less powerful economies by the more powerful economies. Still the question of achieving an egalitarian society continues to remain a chimera.*

*Correspondence: Archana Gupta, A. Babu Rajendra Prasad, agupta2@lko.amity.edu © (2024) All rights are reserved with the author (s) published by CaveMark Publications. This is an Open Access Article distributed under the Creative Commons Attribution License at <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/> which permits unrestricted use, distribution and reproduction in any form or medium, provided that the original work is properly cited or acknowledged.

This paper is available online on www.literaryherm.org and it was published by CaveMark Publications, India.

One of the celebrated works of Ngugi Wa Thiongo's *Weep not Child* addresses various topics like fear, betrayal, rebellion, victory etc which constitute a typical postcolonial text. The famous writer Ben Okri writes in the Introduction to *Weep Not Child*, "The realities of Kenya are all in *Weep Not, Child*: the divisions in society, the root of betrayals, the problematic question of the land, and the never-ending implications of colonial rule" (Thiong'o 16). Okri throws light on the significance of the novel in the light of colonial rule and the Mau Mau movement that was active to revolt against the diplomatic missions of the British rule in mid-20th Century in Kenya.

One of the successful Kenyan Writers, who carved a niche for himself in the canon of African Literature is Ngugi Wa Thiong'o. He has projected his creative genius in many of his works. *Weep Not, Child* is his first novel, or it can be called a novella as it is shorter as compared to his other works. Ben Okri writes in the Introduction to the novel that despite being his first novel, "it leads with assurance, its poise, its mastery, its intentions, its firm and quiet tone, and its unswerving purpose. It is rare that a first novel is so perfectly pitched—and Ngugi was only twenty-eight years old when he published it. *Weep Not, Child* shows Ngugi's birth as a writer, his leap into literature, fully formed, like Athena from the skull of Zeus" (Thiong'o 11). *Weep Not, Child* was written under his anglicized name James Ngugi. However, he later switched to his Gikuyu name Ngugi Wa Thiong'o and with this name he wrote his other works. He has shown his craftsmanship as well as his love for African tradition and culture in many other works like *The River Between*, *A Grain of Wheat*, *Petals of Blood*, *Homecoming*, *Devil on the Cross* etc.

In the novel *Weep Not, Child*, the author throws light on the inherent fear in the minds of natives at the sight of colonizers. In the novel, one notices that the members of Gikuyu tribe are afraid of losing their land as land is considered an asset for the African Community. Land is addressed as Mother Earth in the novel. In other words, land is treated with a lot of sanctity by the natives. On the contrary, the Whites look at land as an instrument of progress and development. As the theoreticians of Eco-criticism point out, it is of paramount importance for

individuals to conserve the resources of Mother Nature to save mankind. The indigenous population of African Society firmly believed in this viewpoint, and it is only after the arrival of Europeans from Belgium, France, England, Germany and Spain that exploitation of Mother Nature started.

A critical analysis of the text also reveals that the main problem between the colonizer and the colonized is related to land. Ngotho the head of the family is looking for crumbs from the colonizers. He works as a laborer on his own land. As per the narrative in the text, Ngotho becomes a kind of Muoi (a landless laborer). For his land is not merely his profession on which he works. It is his own “self” with which he associates so much that its loss means Ngotho’s own death. To support this argument, Ben Okri writes in the Introduction to the novel:

. . . land here is more than just the earth or soil, for farming and harvest. It is also the compact with an ancestral deity. . . . The land is in fact the myth of the people—the promised contract, what anchors them on earth and in heaven. In fact, the land is the body of the ancestral deity. To lose it is to lose connection with the Gods of the people, to be unmoored and unhoused in time. Land here has profoundly different meanings to the colonist and to the colonized: To one it is a source of power, compared to the body of a woman—a haven, an escape from home, a new homeland, and an act of conquest. But to the other it is life itself, life as it streams through the pathways of myth, life as it is embodied in all that makes one human. The loss of land, therefore, is the sign of the broken axis of a people. Land comes to stand for language, dignity, selfhood, independence, and freedom. It is this mythical sense of the land that is at the symbolic heart of *Weep Not, Child* that gives the novel its rootedness, its poignancy, its depth of feeling. (Thiong’o 14-15)

Ben Okri has rightly emphasized the importance of land in natives’ life as their survival solely depends on the land itself. He has also distinguished between the value of land in the life of a colonizer and the colonized. This is one of the primary reasons why one of the older sons Boro in the novel gets furious with his father. In fact, Boro fought on the side of Britishers in World War II. Even after

doing their bit to bring about a victory for the allies, Boro and the other native soldiers were not rewarded by the Britishers. Further, Boro notices that even their very own ancestral land has been taken away by the whites due to the negligence of his father. All hell breaks loose in the family and Boro goes to the extent of blaming his father for the non-protection of their ancestral land.

As it happened in many communities, betrayal of natives took place even among the members of Gikuyu tribe. Some members went to the extent of colluding with the whites to get a few favours. Jacobo is one such character in the novel who joins hands with the English man Mr. Howland and exercises all colonial policies against his own people. In the early part of the novel itself, one of the characters – Mugo Wa Kibiro makes a prediction that the lands of the natives will be grabbed from them by the whites. Ngotho tells the story of Kenya's past and the parents of Kenya being- Gikuyu (only man) and Mumbi (only woman) in the beginning. They gave homage to the Creator Murungu. Ngotho says, "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, you're God/under my sacred tree...'" (Thiong'o 24). The myth behind land snatching by the Whites was as mentioned by the writer in the novel is:

There was a big drought sent to the land by evil ones who must have been jealous of the prosperity of the children of the Great One. But maybe also the children of Mumbi forgot to burn a sacrifice to Murungu. So he did not shed His blessed tears that make crops grow. The sun burnt freely. Plague came to the land. Cattle died and people shrank in size. Then came the white man as had long been prophesied by Mugo wa Kibiro, that Gikuyu seer of old. He came from the country of the ridges, far away from here. Mugo had told the people of the coming of the white man. He had warned the tribe. So, the white man came and took the land. . . . We made the roads and cleared the forest to make it possible for the warring white man to move more quickly. (Thiong'o 25)

Mr. Howland ensures that the land comes to the colonizers and remains with them by hook or crook. It is a sorry sight to behold the Blacks working for Whites in their own lands. As mentioned earlier, the prediction of Mugu Wa Kibiro comes true. It is betrayal of the highest order that makes Blacks lose their own land to the Whites. With the hope of getting into the good books of the colonizer, the colonized do certain things which prove to be harmful in the long run. This is one of the recurring themes in African Literature. The famous African writer Chinua Achebe also emphasizes this theme in his landmark work *Things Fall Apart*.

In the Introduction to Robert J.C. Young's *Postcolonialism: A Very Short Introduction*, Montage says, "... postcolonialism offers you a way of seeing things differently, a language and a politics in which your interests come first, not last" (2). In the postcolonial context, the paper reveals how Mau Mau Rebellion or Mau Mau Uprising began in Kenya under the leadership of Dedan Kimathi. It is the brutal atrocities committed by Whites that led to Mau Mau Rebellion. The rebels targeted not only the colonizers but also the colonized who were in collusion with the colonizers. Guerilla Warfare was employed by the rebels to attack those who were in power and their supporters. As expected, the Britishers crushed the rebels ruthlessly. The impact of Mau Mau Rebellion and its consequences are graphically described by Thiong'o in the novel. The protagonist Njoroge's life gets totally disturbed because of Mau Mau rebellion. In fact, the kith and kin of Njoroge also suffered a lot due to Mau Mau revolt. Mau Mau rebellion replaced Kenyan African Union (KAU) when the rebels lost faith in both rulers and collaborators. In the novel *Weep not Child*, one notices that people pin a lot of hopes on their political leader Jomo Kenyatta. The incarceration of the leader leads to disillusionment in the mind of the protagonist which leads Njoroge to take the step of suicide towards the end of the novel.

One of the other important reasons for Mau Mau revolt emergence in Kenya was the disillusionment among youths. In fact, many youths were recruited by Britishers in both the World Wars. Like other places, Kenyans too were forced to fight in both the World Wars on the side of Britishers. Still, the contribution of Kenyan Soldiers did not yield the desired result for Kenya after the allies emerged

victorious. This led to the birth of Kenyan African Study Union, which got later renamed as Kenyan African Union (KAU). Finally, Mau Mau Rebellion emerged with the sole objective of gaining independence for Kenya. The Britishers somehow managed to stop the rebellion but Kenyans ultimately became independent in 1963. Thiongo's novel *Weep not Child* does not fully cover the rebellion but brings out the views of both the colonizer and the colonized. Even the colonizers spearheaded by Mr. Howland wonder how long the same tactics can be employed to keep the colonized in check. Sooner or later, the natives will certainly overpower the rulers. The novelist does not vividly explain the chronological sequence of events as mentioned in history. A close reading of the text makes readers understand the pains taken by the author to bring out the inner turmoil in the mind of Njoroge. The writer's intention in bringing out the impact of colonization on young minds is evidently seen in *weep Not, Child* especially through the protagonists Njoroge and Mwihaki.

Language and culture were the two major tools to colonize and dominate the natives. In his book *Decolonizing the Mind*, Ngugi calls language a means of spiritual subjugation. The meteoric rise and fall of Njoroge is mostly the impact of this subjugation in the novel *Weep not, Child*. For Njoroge English education can help him get his land back from the colonizers. The writer mentions in the novel, "Education for him, as for many boys of his generation, held the key to the future" (Thiong'o 60). Nyokabi and Ngotho both felt proud of having a son like Njoroge who was studying in school. She imagined "Look, I've a son as good and as well-educated as any you can find in the land!" (Thiong'o 16). Even the title *Weep not, Child* conveys a symbolic meaning. It has been borrowed from Walt Whitman's poem "On the Beach at Night" in which the poet writes, "Weep not, child/ Weep not, my darling/ With these kisses let me remove your tears" (Whitman 14-16). In his poem, Whitman seems to be offering a ray of hope to the child that there will be another day so he should wipe his tears and cry no more. In Ngugi's book *Weep Not Child*, he offers the same hope to the grieving child (Njoroge) who does not get his desired results at the end of the novel. In fact, he even loses what he had – his home, his father, his brother and moreover his faith

in getting English mode of education is shattered to pieces. Therefore, the lines are appropriately quoted in the prologue of this novel. May be the author wants to highlight the fact that there is always a silver lining among dark clouds. Though the protagonist loses everything in the journey of life, he continues to live offering a ray of hope for readers.

A cursory reading of the text will make readers understand that Njoroge starts his life on a promising note. In fact, Njoroge was a dreamer as a student. Just like any other native, Njoroge thinks the English mode of education will help him to climb the social ladder of life. At school, there were no differences between Blacks and Whites. Njoroge even befriends a girl Mwhiki in the class and soon the friendship between the two blossoms into love. Unfortunately, when the relationship between the two families deteriorates, it is love that suffers. One tragedy after another strikes the protagonist. First and foremost, Njoroge's girlfriend Mwhiki drifts apart from his life. Next, the Mau Mau rebellion turns out to be a fiasco. Then, Njoroge hears that his half-brother Boro will be executed. Further, his other brother Kamau also is expected to be imprisoned. All these events shatter the hopes of Njoroge, who at one point becomes philosophical. Njoroge broods over the loss of his near and dear ones and most importantly the death of his father Ngotho forces him to re-evaluate his decision of getting higher education and be like English men. The ending of the novel, through the actions of Njoroge, sums up the fact that land can be reclaimed but not the people. It is his mother's words that prevent him from committing suicide. The desire to take care of his mother makes him abandon the plan of suicide and he comes back. In short, the novel concludes by offering a ray of hope to readers. As the saying goes, there is always some light at the end of the tunnel, one can say that the protagonist lives to fight for yet another day.

The trio comprising of Boro, Kamau and the protagonist Njoroge follow different trajectories of life. Having firsthand experience of war Boro suffers from the mental trauma of having been enlisted in the war. Most of Boro's stories as well as those who participated in war revolve around their experiences in the war. Boro could not forget the loss of his own brother in the meaningless world war

fought between the allies and axis powers. According to Boro, “All white people stick together. But we Black people are much divided. And because they stick together they’ve imprisoned Jomo, the only hope we had. Now they’ll make us slaves. They took us to their wars and they killed all that was of value to us...” (Thiong’o 82). Boro’s disappointment led to disillusionment which further paved the way for frustration as it is visible in the actions of Boro in the novel *Weep Not, Child*. The people of Kenya discussed about the world war with awe and even they did not know the reality of world wars. They were exploited at the hands of the colonizers and were forcibly uprooted from their native land and sent to faraway places to serve the vested interests of the colonizers. There is a wide gulf in the strategies employed during World War I and World War II. Trench warfare was employed in World War I: Atom bombs were dropped on the twin cities of Hiroshima and Nagasaki. The people from different colonies were sent as soldiers to participate in both the wars on behalf of the colonizers. The novel lays bare the atrocities of the war as well as the foolishness of the natives to have participated in the war after losing their precious lives. The catastrophic nature of modern war was unknown to natives as the writer mentions in the novel:

People did not know how big the war had been because most of them had never seen a big war fought with planes, poison, fire and bombs—bombs that would finish a country just like that when they were dropped from the air. It was indeed a big war because it made the British worry and pray and those black sons of the land who had gone to fight said it was a big war. . . . Why should the white men have fought? Aaa! You could never tell what these people would do. In spite of the fact that they were all white, they killed one another with poison, fire and big bombs that destroyed the land. They had even called the people to help them in killing. (Thiong’o 5-6)

The people of Mahua village remain ignorant about the politics and atrocities of the West. Njoroge and Kamau standing at the hilltop see Nairobi from distance and look at the shining lights of the “big city” as they call it. Anyone who goes there might forget home as discussed by Kamau and Njoroge. Kamau says, “None

can forget home” (Thiong’o 44). They were trying to pierce through the darkness and see Nairobi which is symbolic of their vision for the future. As Boro and Kori have also now gone to Nairobi they expect some day they will be back. In their discussion they also mention that “England is for White people only” and not for Blacks. “They are robbers.” (Thiong’o 46). Njoroge dreamed of getting an education in England. Both the boys, Njoroge and Kamau wish to build a home of their own for their family-one after getting education in formal school and another after being trained in carpentry. “Home” is something symbolic of one’s own roots and gives a sense of comfort and belongingness. After losing their land and seeing their father work on his own land as a slave gives a shooting pain to these boys. However, England on the other hand seems to them “the home of learning” (Thiong’o 5) from where Mr. Howland has come. Mimicking whites is the only dream Njoroge’s eyes have seen when he tells Kamau “I was thinking that if both of us could learn and become like John, the big son of Jacobo, it would be a good thing” (Thiong’o 4). In terms of Homi Bhabha “... colonial mimicry is the desire for a reformed, recognizable Other” which pulls the characters torn apart between the real self and the mimicked self (86). Part I of the novel titled as *The Waning Light* reflects on this gradual fading away of the light of culture/truth/innocence/love/ and moreover humanity which lost its significance with the uproar of Mau Mau movement. With the beginning of the first chapter itself, Nyokabi’s words bring this fact to light that education needs money. Being born and brought up in a poor family, a childlike Njoroge has to face many challenges to meet his expectations in future. The ignorance overloaded with innocence in Njoroge makes it difficult for him to realize what getting education means in the colonial Kenya. For him, going to school meant fulfilling one’s dreams and attending school meant more than anything else. His assurance to his mother that he will never bring shame to his family seeks reassurance from Nyokabi to allow him to go to school. He says, “O, Mother. I’ll never bring shame to you. Just let me get there, just let me” (Thiong’o 3).

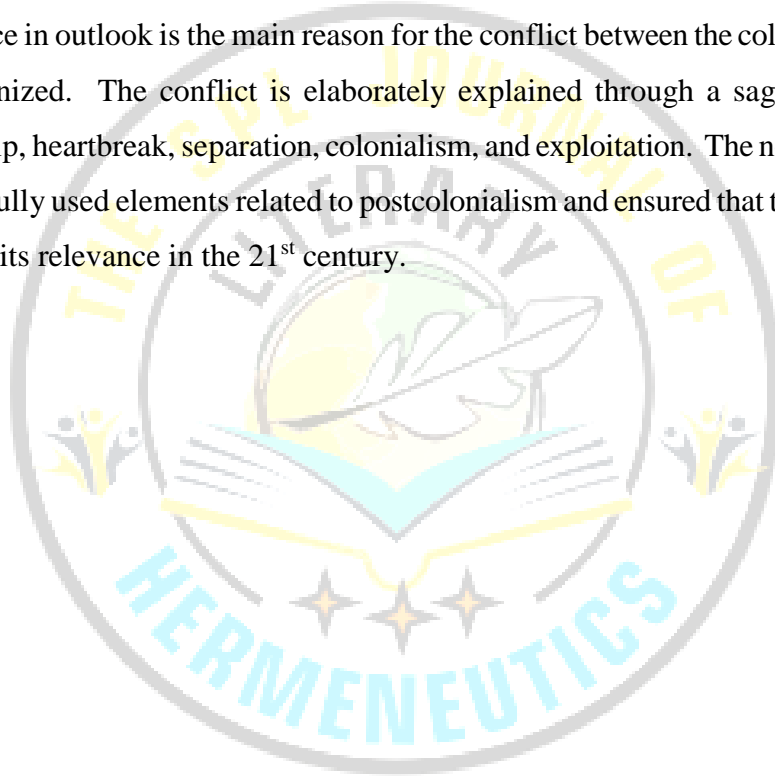
Apart from colonization, racism and dehumanization are some of the atrocious practices practiced by whites against blacks. The Blacks were

considered as masses by Whites, and this is the key reason why Blacks were treated in an inhuman manner by the Whites. The prevailing notion was that White is right; Black is wrong. As a result, discrimination was practiced by Whites on Blacks to show their superiority. Like Blacks, Whites also suffer from mental bondage. They want to prove themselves superior all the time. This led to the evil practice of racism and dehumanization. With herculean effort, Kenyans managed to free themselves from the clutches of Britishers. In the novel *Weep not Child*. The inhuman practices of Whites against Blacks leave the protagonist Njoroge crestfallen. Finally, it is the sagacious words uttered by his father Ngotho that prevent him from falling into the abyss. Now the million-dollar question is whether the successful implementation of political decolonization will culminate in decolonizing the mind. The author appeals for hope in this hopeless world.

The author focuses on certain major themes like divide and rule policy, violence, revenge, guilt, disillusionment etc. apart from racial discrimination based on color, and landownership. The divide and rule policy adopted by the Britishers in India is repeated in Kenya also. In the novel, *Weep Not, Child*, Mr. Howlands employs the same policy to break the unity of Blacks. The writer writes, "Black people had no land because of colour bar, and they could not eat in hotels because of colour bar. Colour bar was everywhere. Rich Africans could also practice colour bar on the poorer Africans..." (Thiong'o 69). Kamau explains to Njoroge about the treatment of Blacks towards blacks which happened to him during his apprenticeship with Nganga, the carpenter. He says, "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" (Thiong'o 21). Ngotho and Jacobo come to blows with each other due to the cunningness of Mr. Howlands. In fact, Ngotho and Jacobo are at loggerheads with each other because of different reasons. While Ngotho goes on the offensive to protest land grab by whites, Jacobo works in the very land under the leadership of Mr. Howlands. Violence is employed by Whites to curb Mau Mau rebellion. The entire family of Ngotho is disintegrated because of violence. Guilt consciousness troubles Boro for creating hardships in

the life of his father Ngotho. Ngotho also feels guilt-stricken for losing control over the land. Most of the characters feel disillusioned towards the end of the novel. Njoroge feels disillusioned at different points in the novel and the climax of his dissatisfaction is his attempt to commit suicide.

The novel *Weep not, Child* critically dissects the differing viewpoints of the colonizer and the colonized. The colonizer looks at land just as a commodity. On the contrary, the colonized looks at the land with veneration. The colonizer's only objective was progress and development. The objective of the colonized was to use the land for one's own needs as well as the members of the clan. The difference in outlook is the main reason for the conflict between the colonizer and the colonized. The conflict is elaborately explained through a saga of love, friendship, heartbreak, separation, colonialism, and exploitation. The novelist has successfully used elements related to postcolonialism and ensured that the novella retained its relevance in the 21st century.



Works Cited and Consulted

- Ashcroft, Bill, Gareth Griffiths, and Helen Tiffin. *The Empire Writes Back: Theory and Practice in Post-Colonial Literatures*. London: Routledge, 1989. Print.
- Bhabha, Homi K. "Of Mimicry and Man: The Ambivalence of Colonial Discourse." *The Location of Culture*. London: Routledge, 1994. 85-92. Print.
- Fanon, Frantz. Introduction. *Black Skin, White Masks*. By Fanon. Trans. C. L. Markmann. London: Pluto, 1986. 9-16. Google Book Search. Web. 11 Dec 2011.
- Nagarajan, M. S. *English Literary Criticism and Theory: An Introductory History*. Orient Blackswan, 2006.
- Nayar, Pramod K. "Contemporary Literary And Cultural Theory: From Structuralism To Ecocriticism." *Google Books*, Longman, 2010, <https://books.google.co.in/books>.
- Thiong'o, Ngugi Wa. *Decolonizing the Mind: The Politics of Language in African Literature*. Heinemann, 1986.
- Thiong'o, Ngugi. *Weep Not, Child*. Penguin, 2012.
- Whitman, Walt. "On the Beach at Night by Walt Whitman | Poetry Foundation." *Poetry Foundation*, <https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/45475/on-the-beach-at-night>. Accessed 1 Dec. 2023.

Archana Gupta

Dr Archana Gupta is an Assistant Professor at Amity School of Languages, Amity University, Lucknow. She has a consistent good academic record and secured a good first division in her M. A. and M. Phil in English. She cleared NET (JRF) in 2008. In December 2017, she was awarded her doctorate degree on the topic *The Rhetoric of Selfhood: A Study of Select South -Asian Women Writers' Autobiographies*. Dr. Archana Gupta has also presented research papers at various

national and International Conferences and her research papers have come out in reputed journals. The quality of her research reflects her academic mind and a calibre for good research. She is also Silver and Gold Medalist in NPTEL Courses. She is a poet at heart and loves to write poems. She is intelligent, sincere, hard-working, and a dedicated teacher as well as researcher.

A. B. R. Prasad

Dr. A.B.R. Prasad is currently working as an Associate Professor in Amity School of Languages, Amity University, Lucknow Campus since 2017. He is a gold medalist in B.A., and M Phil. He is a class topper in M.A. He has more than two decades of teaching experience in various reputed institutions of India. He is a four-time country topper and also a silver medalist in NPTEL Courses (History of English Language and Literature, Poetry, American Literature, Western Political Thought, Nineteenth Century Novel and Literary Criticism). He has presented more than 40 papers in various National and International Conferences. His expert areas include Diaspora Literature, English Language Teaching, Indian Writing in English, History of English Literature, American Literature, Literary Criticism, etc. His lectures are appreciated by students and academicians in the academic sector.