

Impact of Colonialism in Ngugi Wa Thiong'o's *The River Between*

M. Sivasasipoorani, M.A., M.Phil.



Ngugi Wa Thiong'o

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Abstract

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Ngugi wa Thiong'o is one of the remarkable African novelists. He is an out spoken critic of the colonial rule, Christianity and also the post-colonial abuses of Kenyan authorities. His works remain relevant to present-day-Kenya, illuminating many of the countries underlying political problems. They deal with the relationship between Africans and British colonists in Africa. Ngugi's novels explore his commitment to the Africans and his strong voice against the whites who indulged in the exploitation of the Africans. Ngugi's *The River Between* is mainly concerned with the exploitations of Africans by the Whites and the adverse impact of colonisation on the culture of Kenya. The cultural clash brought about by the interaction of traditional and colonial interests is well illustrated in the novel. Waiyaki the hero of the novel and Nyambura are presented in an ambivalent attitude towards the elements of the culture of white man. In *The River Between*, Ngugi wa Thiong'o has tried to show the paradox inherent in the acquisition of western education and how much education instead of truly empowering Kenyans was rather alienating from their own roots.

Key words: Colonization, oral traditions, Ngugi Wa Thiong'o, *The River Between*

Ngugi wa Thiongo

The period of Colonization is, doubtlessly one of the most painful periods in human history. During that era, the continent of Africa had been dissected by predator nations so that they could expropriate the land, pillage the resources and force the native work as slave in their ancestral lands. African literature written in English is essentially, a by-product of the colonial enterprise. The urgent need for natives who could help colonial administrators in running the affairs of the colonies led to the establishment of colonial schools and college. As these schools had been fashioned closely after British schools, their alumni testified to excellence in many

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professions, and had lived to the expectation of the imperialist rulers. However, some of these talented elites who could apprehend the insidious goal of the colonizers enlisted the knowledge given to them to subvert the colonial enterprise.

Many oral and written discourses, whose main thrust was to reflect the suffering of colonial subjects under the encroaching European powers, were produced by the Africans who were trained in colonial schools. African writers who were educated in colonial school and colleges were, therefore, obliged to speak out against injustices inflicted their people. One of such writers is Ngugi wa Thiongo whose novels, plays and essays are epitomes of anti-colonial discourse. Ngugi's works are remarkable for their attempt to challenge the dubious civilizing claim of the colonizers.

Ngugi is committed writer believing in class war and in the seizure of political power by workers and peasants through violent struggles. He is an uncompromising champion of African identity and culture and stands for the decolonization of mind from all traces of subservience and enslavement that smack of the white man's hegemony in areas of culture, language, Eurocentred values, Capitalistic, imperialistic, economic, and political domination. (Reddy 79)

The River Between

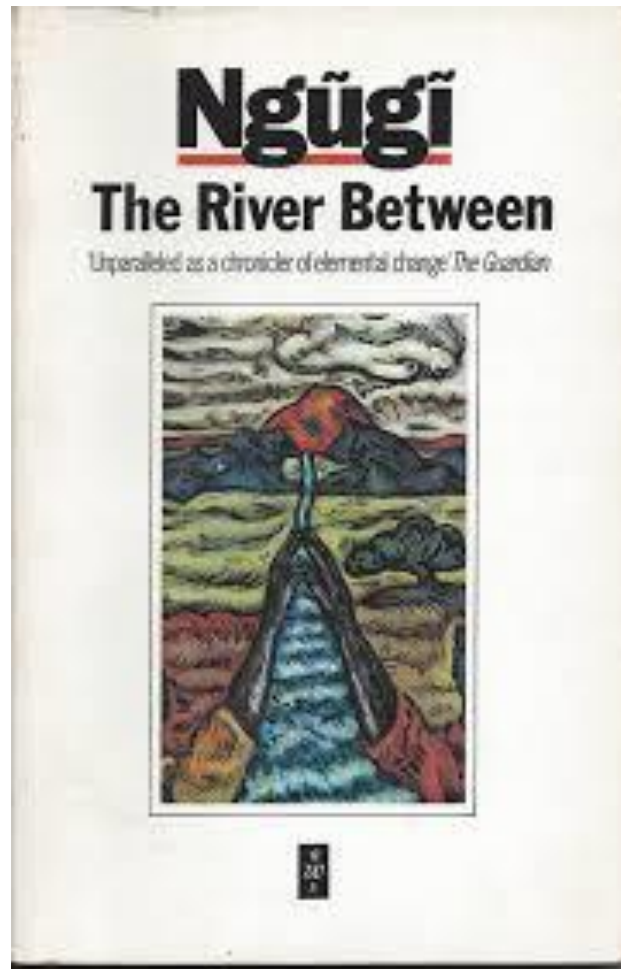
Ngugi's novel *The River Between* (1986) is a perfect illustration of how the theme of colonization is at the heart of most African literature written in English. Like, Achebe's novel *Things Fall Apart*, it engages the early days of colonial intervention and vividly depicts the disruption of pre-colonial an idyllic tribal life style at the hand European missionaries and colonizers.

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The River Between is one of the best representatives of the ambivalence toward the native and foreign cultures in the 1920s. It is concerned with the divisions and hostilities that emerged among the natives as a result of colonization. Ngugi himself lived in a middle position between his culture and that of the colonizer. Therefore, his first written novel came as a reflection of the state that he experienced. The style of the novel and the representation of its characters combine elements from both the Gikuyu and the European culture. Also, the important characters are

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presented in an ambivalent attitude toward the elements of the culture of the white man. Ngugi worked to show his preference of this position by projecting his protagonists under that light.

The River Between is an exemplary text of the ambivalence that characterizes the works of those who lived under the pressure of colonialism in the 1920s. Both colonizer and colonized were engaged in acts of cultural translation, trying to invent their traditions and selves in relation to the realities of the other. Also, the different sources of education that Ngugi got helped him in developing an ambivalent attitude toward the Western culture provided him with a hybrid background.

Conflict between the Natives

The central conflict of *The River Between* does not revolve around the struggle between the colonizers and the colonized, but rather around that among the natives themselves, as a result of the divisions and rifts created by colonization.

As the events of the novels unfold, it becomes clear that some of Mukuyu residents have converted to Christianity, while Kamino inhabitants remain true to their traditional religion. The two ridges, afterwards, become enemies. Led by Joshua the fanatic village priest the Christian converts vilify all traditional rites because “The unerring white man had called the Gikuyu god, the prince of darkness.” (23) Hence, Makuyu has been established as a centre for the activities of the Christian converts, where a church has been built.

The novel's opening situates the narrative's broader conflicts within a Kenyan landscape that has yet to experience the effects of British colonialism:

The two ridges lay side by side. One was Kameno, the other was Makuyu.

Between them was a valley. It was called the valley of life. Behind Kameno and Makuyu were many more valleys and ridges, lying without any discernible plan. They were like many sleeping lions which never woke. They just slept, the big deep sleep of their Creator. A river flowed through the valley of life... The river was called Honia, which meant cure, or bringback- life. Honia river never dried: it seemed to possess a strong will to live, scorning droughts and weather changes.

(TRB 1)

The deeply rooted conflict between the Kameno and Makuyu ridges is centrally one of the religious antagonisms; whereas the Kameno ridge, home of the novel's protagonist Waiyaki, symbolizes a continuation of indigenous cultural traditions such as polytheism and circumcision, the inhabitants of the Makuyu ridge had already succumbed to the exigencies of Christianity and British educational systems.

Focus on Exploitation

Ngugi's *The River Between* is mainly concerned with the exploitation of the Africans by the Whites and adverse impact of colonization on the culture of Kenya. The alienation of the Gikuyu land and its appropriation by European settlers is, therefore, bound to cause an intense stir among the Gikuyu people which culminated into what came to be known as the Mau Mau movement.

Chege and Livingstone

Chege, a respected man of the ridges, a believed descendent of Mugo wa Kabiro, also predicted the arrival of the White man. He told the people of the ridges that the Whites had already set up their houses and taken away their land in the neighbouring places of Murungu,

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Nyeri and Kiambo. But the people refused to take it seriously. These Whites soon occupied the surrounding land and with their religious preaching and catechism, they were able to convert to their faith quite a few natives like Joshua and Kabonyi. Indeed, the act of conversion is the first step of colonialism.

Livingstone, the leading missionary, visited the hills just to give new life and energy to his followers. He made Joshua, the black convert his agent to carry on his main work of preaching to the Africans about the existence of God-Jesus. Through Joshua, a firm and capable preacher, Livingstone was able to convert many Africans to take to the new faith shedding their faith in the native religion. "Joshua the native convert is their representative." (Rai 124)

The preaching of new ways and values of life through a new religion had a drastically adverse effect on the old beliefs. Ngugi remarkably portrays in *The River Between*, the tragic predicament of the Kenyans torn by a lacerating conflict between the loss of cultural heritage and identity in the exploitative colonial context at both the individual and societal levels.

Thiong'o's novel focuses on the struggle between two towns named Makuyu and Kameno Prior to the colonization of the white settlers, both ridges lived in peace and were united by their common belief systems. However, the arrival of Christian missionaries caused separation between the two. In the novel, Makuyu represents the stronghold for Christian integration due to the fact that Joshua who was converted by Livingston at the Siriana Mission School established by the colonials and his followers live there and constantly preach about God.

Belief Systems

Joshua epitomizes the Christian belief system, in that, he is unwavering and uncompromising about his faith. In addition to this, he preaches outspokenly and vehemently against the ways of the tribe. He is the most extreme out of all the converts in that he abandoned all practices related to the tribe, making no secret of his abhorrence against them. His own name is representative of this hatred as the name “Joshua” is a biblical name that he most likely adopted. In contrast, Kameno is considered as the stronghold for the traditional Gikuyu beliefs and Chege, Waiyaki’s father, is the representation of Gikuyu tradition. In this way, both men parallel to each other and represent two sides of the conflict.

Ngugi makes circumcision the central point around which he rotates his novel and describes in telling manner the cultural exploitation of the Africans by Whites. He makes it explicitly clear that the act of circumcision is the most central in the Gikuyu way of life.

Circumcision was an important ritual to the tribe. It kept people together, bound the tribe. It was the core of the social structure, and a something that gave meaning to a man's life. End the custom and the spiritual basis of the tribe cohesion and integration would be no more. (TRB 68)

Circumcision is the symbol of unity and purity of the tribe. Every Gikuyu child longs for the day in which he/she will be circumcised and become able to enter into the world of manhood/womanhood. It is unimaginable that there could be a man who would marry an uncircumcised girl because this means that she did not become a woman yet.

Muthoni

Muthoni, the daughter of Joshua, a catechist of Makuyu defies the Christian code and rebel against her father so as to be circumcised. Muthoni escapes to her aunt’s place at Kameno

to get herself circumcised. But the wound of circumcision becomes very serious. She realizes that she cannot survive the wound and yet she experiences a strange sense of contentment for having been circumcised. What Muthoni attempts through circumcision while holding on to her Christian faith is a reconciliation and integration between the two. This is what both Waiyaki and Nyambura also try for at the cost of their lives. In her death bed, she says, “I am still a Christian, . . . a Christian in the tribe. I am a woman and will grow big and healthy in the tribe.” (TRB 61)

Through representing Muthoni's conflict, Ngugi shows his ability to project the different forms of cultural hybridity. The controversy over female circumcision between the missionaries and the Gikuyu provided Ngugi with rich raw material for writing *The River Between*, because of the serious unrest it had caused in the region.

The novelist clearly draws our attention to the exploitation of the Africans in the field of education imparted by the colonizers. In fact, the education imparted to the students in the Siriana missionary school was directed mainly to advance interests of the British Empire. They wanted to convert the Africans to believe in their faith and help them spread Christianity. They also wanted the students to help them in the administration of the natives. Livingstone recognized Waiyaki to be a possible Christian leader of the Church. Such education began to condemn the native rituals, customs and traditions.

Waiyaki

At the beginning of the novel, Waiyaki is educated at Siriana in response to his father's order to heed the prophecy by learning the wisdom of the white man in order to acquire the best

tools for fighting him. His education plays a large role in changing his attitude toward the colonizer. It opens his eyes to the positive elements in their culture and convinces him that such components could be imported to the life of his community. Such belief leads Waiyaki, throughout the novel, to follow a middle course between the two antagonistic positions. Waiyaki is addressed by the people as a 'teacher.' He had western education, works for the reconciliation of the two groups and dedicates himself for his Gikuyu religion. Although he plays the role of the nationalist redeemer, the new ideals that he acquires in Siriana cause him to live in a struggle between his national duty and his personal convictions.

Portraying the Influence of Colonialism

Ngugi uses the character of Chege to portray the influence of colonialism on even the most traditionalist people. Despite the fact of his being the spiritual leader of the traditionalist Kameno, Chege sends his son to be educated at Siriana, the center of the white man. His words remain in Waiyaki's mind as constant guidelines: "Go to the mission place. Learn all the wisdom and all the secrets of the white man. But do not follow his vices. Be true to your people and the ancient rites." (TRB 20) Chege believes partially in cultural hybridity; for him it is good to be educated but that education should not lead to the abandonment of traditions.

Joshua as a converted Christian began to hate his African culture. He repented all his life for having married circumcised Miriamu. He also did not want his children to have any inclination for their African culture. Joshua began preaching to the people to believe in the Bible and give up the traditions.

Chege was hurt to see many Africans converted. He also was disappointed as he was unable to do anything to save his culture. He feared that even his son Waiyaki might begin to dislike the ways of the ridge and its rituals. The readers can find clearly the impact of missionary education on him. The day before circumcision Waiyaki felt hesitated to join with other boys. At first, he stood as an outsider. He grew uneasy to listen to the songs of circumcision sung by the young Kenyan boys and girls of his age. When he was pushed into the circle dancing around fire, his body moved mechanically. The voice of Whiteman's education made him guilty so he could not put his heart in it.

Waiyaki, perhaps occupying a liminal position between the two ridges, is forced to negotiate between contending loyalties and allegiances-between, on one hand, his foreseen responsibility as the prophesied "saviour" of Kameno traditions, and on the other hand, his conviction in the values of British education and his clandestine relationship with Nyambura, the beautiful daughter of the region's foremost Christian minister.

By handling such issues, *The River Between* ushers in Ngugi's life-long fight against colonialism and its legacy. The novel reflects Ngugi's attempt to convey the conflicts that his African contemporaries suffered. It works to create an anti-colonial atmosphere by exposing the disruptive effects that colonization generates. Ngugi's *The River Between* recaptures the stage of the split in African consciousness when it had drunk in full the pain of the hurt and finally decided to look the white world in the face. It reflects both the reaction and uprootedness of a culturally unhinged Africa.

Waiyaki is the hero of the novel and as the story progresses, he is destined to play a mediatory role in trying to reconcile the rival inhabitants of the ridges. So Chage entreats with his son to take up the task of saving his people. On the occasion of his initiation ceremony,

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which he goes through manfully, he experiences in full blast the tug of contrary impulses battling in his mind. It was a conflict between old beliefs and the knowledge inherited from his father on the one hand and the new knowledge which he had acquired at school on the other. This conflict between the old and the new and the intensity with which it rages in Waiyaki's mind, gives a tragic dimension to the novel.

Contradictions

The contradiction between Waiyaki's learning and his mission as a saviour causes him to live in isolation. His mind is often preoccupied with thoughts about the utility of his educating project and whether that project can serve in realizing the liberating aim that is expected from him by his father and society.

The dilemma of the central character in the novel lies in the very prophecy that identified him as the one who would restore to the tribe its pre-colonial cultural purity and lost land. Waiyaki's internal and external conflicts can best be understood as a typical "crisis of identity" suffered by the individual in any colonial situation. Waiyaki's "crisis of identity" is masterfully brought home by Ngugi's successful deployment of the cast of characters. The set of other characters can be viewed as foibles of Waiyaki's character, since each may be contrasted with him. Joshua's uncompromising militancy and fanaticism, for example, is in a stark contrast with Waiyaki's religious tolerance.

Ngugi has created another character whose tragic death seems to prefigure the inevitable failure of Waiyaki's reconciliatory endeavours, and thereby indicates the perils of biculturalism. Muthoni, Joshua's daughter, dies because she tries to participate in the Gikuyu rites while keeping her Christian faith.

The divergence between the two is that while Waiyaki sees himself as an instrument for unity of the ridges, Muthoni, only, seeks self-salvation. Unlike Waiyaki, she is presented not as a model to be emulated, but as a lonely figure unable to cause change in either community.

Muthoni's death, even though individual act has accelerated the conflict of the novel. Waiyaki himself conceives it as a turning point in the history of the ridges because it has exacerbated an already volatile situation and kindled conflicting calls and loyalties in many.

As a senior student in Siriana Secondary School, Waiyaki seems to have internalised some of European values. In spite of his resistance he could not help gathering and absorbing notions and ideas that stopped him from responding spontaneously to these dances and celebrations. He even started to lose sight of the very reason that has initially brought him to school to the extent that he dismisses it as "an illusion, an old man dream." (TRB 39) However, Waiyaki has happily gone through the rite of circumcision without flinching. People are surprised that he had not been "softened by the white man's education." (43)

Waiyaki begins his journey towards manhood and leadership by going to Siriana Mission School. Keeping his mind open to new ideas, he experiences a change in him, ... (Dhar 240)

Another important strand in the plot of *The River Between* is Waiyaki's romance with Joshua's second daughter, Nyambura. The significance of this love story lies in the impossibility of its consummation in matrimony due to divisions caused by the advent of white civilization. For Waiyaki to marry a daughter of a Christian and uncircumcised girl is tantamount to high treason. It is used by his opponent Kabonyi to strip him of the leadership of the tribe and execute him.

Also a Love Story

Ngugi has woven the love story of Waiyaki and Nyambura, whose love tries to transcend the limitations of religious rivalry, and in the process becomes a prey to the conflict for power within the member of the tribe. The Kiama controlled by Kabonyi, views the growing popularity of Waiyaki as a threat, and brings the charge against him that he is out to pollute the purity of the tribe by trying to marry an uncircumcised girl, Nyambura, whose father leads those who have embraced Christianity. Waiyaki's decision to marry Nyambura was his attempt at uniting a tribe divided on religion. The tragic end of the lovers at the end is indicative of how the tribe is not yet ready to accept a visionary and a Messiah among it. The fate of Waiyaki is similar to that of many prophets in history who were spurned by their people, only to later realize their guilt. The story of this pair of star-crossed lovers is complicated due to the dynamics of power which runs parallel to the vision of Waiyaki. Though the complications in the theme of love were in the first novel, it is in *The River Between* that it becomes directly entangled in the conflict over power.

Waiyaki had thought of leading the people against the colonizer by uniting them with education, yet he fails. His failure can be attributed to the fact that he fails to understand the nerve of the tribe—he had all the time thought it was education which they wanted, while it was political activity which they were looking for.

With the failure of Waiyaki at the end of novel Ngugi seems to portray the defencelessness people of Kenya whose land will be occupied by the imperialist. Kabonyi despite his success in destroying Waiyaki, does not represent a viable alternative for him. No solution is offered as novel closes as far as the fate of the country is concerned. Such uncertainty is suggested in the last paragraph of the novel:

The land was now silent. The two ridges lay side by side, hidden in the darkness. And Honia river went on flowing between them, down through the valley of life, its beat rising the dark stillness, reaching into the hearts of the people of Makuyu and Kamenno. (TRB 153)

A Tragic Novel

The River Between is clearly, a tragic novel and Waiyaki is a typical tragic hero whose downfall can be attributed to certain flaws in his character as noted above. The tone of the novel is, in effect, so sad, especially the last sentence. “*The dark stillness*” that has crept into the people’s heart after engulfing the land symbolizes the setting of the sun of freedom from Kenyan landscape. The gloomy texture of the finale of the novel resembles, greatly a funeral dirge. Ngugi is presumably, elegising the passing away of a free nation as the European imperialism tightened its grip on the land.

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M. Sivasasipoorani, M.A., M.Phil.
Standard Fireworks Raja Rathninam College for Women
Thiruthangal Road
Sivakasi – 626123
Tamilnadu
India
msspoorani311993@gmail.com