

TREATMENT OF COLONIZATION IN NGUGI WA THIONGO'S NOVEL *THE RIVER BETWEEN*

Nasreddin Bushra Ahmed
Al Jouf University, Saudi Arabia

ABSTRACT: *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 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. The present paper investigates how Ngugi wa Thiongo has masterfully portrayed the havoc wreaked by Europeans in his community, through the appraisal of one his earliest novels: The River Between.*

KEYWORDS: Colonization; Africa; Ngugi; European

INTRODUCTION

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 establishment of colonial schools and college. As these schools had been fashioned closely after British schools, their alumni testified to excellence in many 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. (Griffith:2000). 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. Among those is the Kenyan Ngugi wa Thiongo , one of the leading figures in African literature. Ngugi's works are remarkable for their attempt to challenge the dubious civilizing claim of the colonizers. Ngugi's novel *The River Between* (1986), the subject of this study, 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.

Portrayal of disintegration of pre-colonial community by colonial intervention

The plot of *The River Between* revolves around the character of Waiyaki, a young Gikuyu man who comes of age in the most unfortunate historical circumstances. Waiyaki has to live in a period that has seen an intense polarisation between the denizens of two coterminous ridges, despite their common genealogy, language and several rites. The reason for the rift as the narrative reveals, is the fulfilment of an ancient Gikuyu prophecy that ' There shall come a

people with clothes like butterflies' Ngugi (1968:2). Those people, doubtlessly, are the European colonisers.

The novel opens with an adept use of the landscape of its locale as it symbolises and simultaneously, flashbacks and foreshadows the past stability and the current and future volatility of the region:

the two ridges lay side. One is Kamino, the other was Mukuyu. Between them was a valley. It was called the valley of life. Behind Kamino and Mukuyu were many more valleys and ridges, lying without any discernible plan. They were like many sleeping lines which never woke. When you stood in the valley, the two ridges ceased to be sleeping lions united by their common source of life. They became antagonistic. You could tell this, not by anything tangible but the way they faced each other, like two rivals ready to come to blows in a life and death struggle for the leadership of this isolated region (RB:1)

Ngugi seems to suggest that far from being a stable and natural entity like the peaceful and unaffected Honia river when viewed from above, national identity is always subject to fierce contestation and change. Even within one ridge such as Makuyu, communal consensus on the anti-colonial project is difficult to achieve. It is apparent that the foremost factors contributing to the conflict in a colonized society are the legacies of colonialism. Indeed, it is the question of how to deal with the colonial ghost that is largely at issue in *The River Between*, a novel that reflects Ngugi's biography, particularly in the wake of cultural nationalism in the 1920s

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' (RB: 23). Hence, Makuyu has been established as a centre for the activities of the Christian converts, where a church has been built.

Kamino, the stronghold of traditionalist, establishes itself as defender of ancestral values and rites in the face of the encroachment of Christian teachings. Led by Chege, who belongs to a long line of seers, Kamino seems to have stronger claim to be the repository of Gikuyu culture. Kamino community, therefore, continue to practice their traditional rites like 'circumcision' despite its prohibition by the Christian missionaries. Henceforth, these rites become the epicentre of the novel's conflict.

The struggle noted above is a cultural struggle that parallels a more significant struggle. At the heart of *The River Between* conflict, lies the usurpation of Gikuyu land by white settlers who follow in the footsteps of the missionaries. The massive seizure of the ancestral Gikuyu land to create vast plantations seems to be the principal impulse of the whole colonialist enterprise. By handling such issues, *The River Between* ushers in Ngugi's life-long fight against colonialism and its legacy

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. That

leader will not achieve his assigned goal, unless, as the prophecy pontificates ‘be wise in the affairs of the white man’ (RB: 38). By all indication that redeemer is Waiyaki who, therefore, has to join a mission school in order to be equipped with the skills that are necessary to his messianic role. Waiyaki’s father, a traditional leader from Kamino, who seemingly concedes to the superiority of the European might, has actually engineered his only son admission into the colonial education:

Now listen my son. Listen carefully, for this an ancient prophecy. I could not do more ...Mugo [the author of the prophecy] often said you could not cut the butterflies[European colonisers] with a panga [a traditional weapon]. You could not spear them until you learn and knew their way and movement. Then you could trap, you could fight back. Before he died, he whispered to his the prophecy “Salvation shall come from the hills. From the blood that flows in me, I say from the same tree, a son shall rise. And his duty is to lead and save the people”I am old, my time is gone. Remember that you are the last in this line. Arise. Heed the prophecy. Go to the mission place. Learn all the wisdom and all the secrets of the white man. But not follow his vices. Be true to your people and the ancestral rite.(Ngugi 1968:20)

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’(RB: 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’. Having courageously endured the traditional ordeal, he must have risen in the public esteem and thereby, becomes a viable candidate for the leadership of the tribe. What the public are not able to see is Waiyaki’s loosened relationship with values of the tribe and his apparent ambivalence towards them. He as Gikandi (2000::60) observes is torn between his wish to become a ‘full-ledged member of Gikuyu culture and the demand placed on him by the colonial rule’

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 caste 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. Kabonyi’s partisan fundamentalism is, similarly, contrastable with Waiyaki’s dreams of unity between the warring ridges and reconciliatory quest. We can catch each at his words. Here is Joshua evoking God’s wrath:

O, God, why don’t you descend on this wicked generations and finish their evil ways?

*Fight by me O, Lord,
Bring down fire and the thunder.
Bring down the flood.(Ngugi 1968:32)*

Below are Kabony's words as reported by the author:

It was better to drive away the white man from the hills altogether. Were the people afraid? Were there no warriors left in the tribe? He, Kabonyi, would lead them. That why he formed the new Kiama. He would rid the country of the influence of the white man. He would restore the purity of tribe and its wisdom. (Ngugi 1968:95)

Different from both Joshua and Kabonyi, Waiyaki, strives throughout the narrative to find a middle path:

Waiyaki did not want to be identified with either side, he was now committed to reconciliation. But since those two meetings things has gone from bad to worse. Each group seemed more arrogant and confident in itself than ever. Joshua preached with more vigour and his followers sang damnation to the pagans openly and defiantly. (Ngugi 1968:110)

Ngugi has created another character whose tragic death seems to prefigure the inevitable failure of Waiyaki 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. Muthoni runs from Makuyu to Kamino to be circumcised- a practice considered sinful by the Christians- so that she can learn all the 'ways of the hills and the ridges' (RB; 26). Muthoni prompt action extenuates Waiyaki's indecision, and the bold way in which she articulates her defence of what Gikandi (2000:62) refers to as 'cultural hybridity' contrasts with Waiyaki's equivocal statements about his position. Muthoni's boldness is evident the following quote:

I am a Christian and my father and mother have followed the new faith. I have not run away from that. But I want to be initiated to the ways of the tribe...I want to be a woman made beautiful in the manner of the tribe (Ngugi 1968,:43-44)

However, while Muthoni's action is an individual move that emanates from a deep personal conviction, while Waiyaki's shaky belief in unity and reconciliation has a wider social significance. Thus, 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. (Ngugi 1968 72)

Another important strand in the plot of *The River Between* is Waiyaki’s romance with Joshua’s second daughter, Nyambura. Palmer(1972:26) describes such romance as ‘the most beautiful part of the novel’. 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. It has, therefore, increased the magnitude of the novel’s conflict and precipitated its tragic denouement. 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. In venturing into such a perilous terrain Waiyaki reinforces his steadfast commitment to reconciliation, and thereby displays rare example of tolerance. Waiyaki visualises his love for Nyambura as ‘something passed between them as two human beings, untainted by religion, social convention or any tradition’

As a nationalist novel, *The River Between* chronicles particular periods in the history of Kenya whose events serve as the backdrop for the episode of the novel. Enlisting a gripping narrative skill, Ngugi interweaves the life stories of his imaginative characters with those historical incidents, while putting across subtle political insights. According to Robson (1972:52) *The River Between* integrates two historical periods in Kenyan history. Firstly, the evangelical movement which is representative of the period of the 1900, illustrated in the novel by Joshua and his followers. Secondly, the independent schools movement of the 1930s which is espoused in the novel by Waiyaki as a solution to the division of the two ridges.

One of the most perennial issues that continue to haunt any discussion of *The River Between* is the debate pertaining to “female circumcision”. It is a ritual that is saturated with cultural and political values and it is as Gikandi(2000:22) has noted ‘central and universal to Gikuyu identity’. An early European observer of the Gikuyu culture wrote:

The festivals and rites with both marriage and death hold but a small place in Kikuyu imagination compared to the greatest of all ceremonies whereby the boy becomes a man and the girl a woman. By this rite of circumcision, with its complicated ritual, each individual passes from the condition of simply being the property of Kikuyu parents to that of a Kikuyu nation, with accompanying rights privileges and which obligations.(qtd in Gikandi 2000)

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. Historically speaking, in 1928 the Church of Scotland Mission stipulated the denunciation of female circumcision as a condition in its membership. Consequently, a large number of the Christian Gikuyu severed their connection with that church to form their own independent churches. The Mission had also expelled the children of the Gikuyu who did not denounce female circumcision from its school. Thus the Gikuyu were forced to establish their own independent schools, recruiting those who were expelled from the European schools as the vanguard teachers. Waiyaki’s famous Mariioshoni school is a

prototype of such schools, and he is a model of those Gikuyu elite who strived to bring to their countrymen the benefit of the European education which seemed to be the sole way out of their state of political colonisation and land disposition.

In *The River Between*, Waiyaki sudden ascent to the peak of tribal leadership is apparently due to his new role as a bringer of ‘white man’s secret magic and power’(RB:64), and he is no longer addressed by his name, but people refer to and call him by “the Teacher”. Coupled by his genealogy, this new role has enhanced his messianic role and deepened people’s belief in him. At a public meeting Waiyaki’s charisma is displayed:

At first he just looked at the people and held them with his eyes. Then he opened his mouth and began to speak. And his voice like the voice of his father – no – it was like the voice of the great Gikuyu of old. Here again was saviour, the one whose words touch the soul of the people. People listened and their hearts moved with the vibration of his voice. (Ngugi 1968:96)

In the above passage Ngugi depicts the model freedom fighter as endowed with necessary talent and skills to lead his nation in their enviable struggle against the usurping colonialist power. Unfortunately, Waiyaki, the protagonist of *The River Between* does not succeed in achieving his liberatory goal. Two personal shortcomings are, presumably, behind his failure. Firstly, Waiyaki’s obsession with education seems to prevent him from realising the immediate needs of his people. Only, when it is too late he has come to understand that Education for an oppressed people is not all’ (RB:138). While Waiyaki has been busy establishing schools his people’s land is being taken away by white settlers, they are forced to work in the same land and are made to pay taxes for a government they knew nothing about. (RB 142). Secondly, Waiyaki’s political naivety has made him an easy victim for the intrigues of his rival Kabonyi who uses the tactic of the oath to impeach and, ultimately, to dethrone him.

The most significant political statements that might be extracted from the narrative of *The River Between*, largely pertain to the issues of occupation of Gikuyu lands and the displacement of Gikuyu culture in the face of the invading European culture. Such issues dominate the African novels that chronicle the process of colonisation of the continent at its earliest stage. As a beginning writer who had assimilated the aesthetics of liberal humanist, Ngugi used the novel form to comment on those social and political issues. He was, in a way, writing to come to terms with events that he witnessed in his childhood in an attempt to represent colonialism from ‘the perspective of its victim’, as Gikandi (2000:6) puts it.

Therefore nostalgia for the harmonious tribal past, and a desire for the recovery of the lost land permeate *The River Between*. The retelling of the Gikuyu myth of creation in the first chapter indicates the importance of land to the Gikuyu people. Murungu, the Creator in the Gikuyu mythology, is believed to have shown around Gikuyu and Mumbi- the father and mother of the tribe- the land that he allotted for them saying ‘ this land I give to you, O man and woman. It is for you to rule and till, you and your posterity’. (Ngugi 1968:2). The Gikuyu attachment to the land is total. Obiechina(1990:173) attributes Waiyaki’s incompetence as a leader to his inability to understand that his people’s relationship to the land is ‘ a very special one, and very emotional one’. Given the time setting of the novel, the reader of *The River Between* would

readily grasp the political message embedded in the narrative. The narrator seems anxious to relate the details of the novel to the issue of land. Even circumcision is endowed with symbolic meaning. Waiyaki's bleeding after circumcision is interpreted as offering to the earth and 'henceforth, a religious bond linked him to the earth' (: 45)

The alienation of the Gikuyuland 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. In *The River Between*, such stir is captured in the spirited political discussions in the teachers' office which 'were a sign of what was happening all over the ridges' where a teacher draws the attention to the way in which settlers prepare the ground for occupation :

Take Siriana Mission for example, the men of God came peacefully. They were given a place. Now see what has happened. They have invited their brother to come and take all the land. Our country is invaded. This Government Post behind Makuyu is a plague in our midst. And this hut tax...(Ngugi 1968 :64).

For the retrieval of the usurped land the Gikuyu people, as the narrative reveals, seem to be polarised along two conflicting courses of action. One line of action is led by Waiyaki who champions a reconciliatory movement aided by education and who believes that with knowledge he can 'uplift the tribe' by giving them the European education. Armed with 'white man learning, he visualises a tribe 'strong enough to chase away the settlers and the missionaries'. The second approach presses for immediate action and has serious doubts about the benefit of education. Led by Kabonyi, the die-hard nationalist who sets up a *Kiama* [a council of elders] 'to preserve the purity of our customs'RB:95). In an open debate, Kabonyi once uses a series of rhetorical question to undermine Waiyaki's leadership abilities and to cast doubt over his educational project, referring to his young age :

*'Was the white man's education really necessary?
'Or do you think the education of our tribe, in any way,
below that of the white man?
'Do not be led by a youth. Did the tail ever lead the head, the child
the father or the cubs the lions?'(Ngugi 1968 :95-96)*

Although the narrator seems to endorse Waiyaki's political perspective, Kabonyi's radical standpoint seems to be more practical and effectual. The narrator, nonetheless, keeps the reader's sympathy with Waiyaki by indicating that Kabonyi staunch anti-colonial activity is only fuelled by personal ambition and jealousy. Waiyaki eventually, fails to achieve anything. His reconciliatory endeavours come to nothing. On the contrary, either of the factions between which he wishes to act as intermediary blames him for its misfortune. The Christian's leader Joshua orders him out of the church when he comes to warn him against the violence intended by Kabonyi and his followers against the Christians, telling him that you 'have always worked against the people of God' (*Ngugi 1968:133*). Likewise, the traditionalist faction has interrogated in a fashion similar to the process of impeachment. He is asked to verify whether or not there is a secret dealing between him and the white man. The final verdict is that Waiyaki is a traitor and it is deplored that 'betrayal is a bad thing for a man in a position of influence' (*Ngugi 1968:126*).

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 . Ngugi as Prasansak (2004:33) observes leaves the reader ‘afloat in uncertainty as to where Kenya would go’. 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 Kameno. (Ngugi 1968:153)

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 symbolises 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.

REFERENCES

- Achebe, C (1988) "An Image of Africa: Racism in Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*." *Heart of Darkness: An Authoritative Text, Background and Sources Criticism*. New York: Norton.
- Gikandi, S (2000) *Ngugi wa Thiong'o*. Cambridge: Cambridge UP.
- Griffith, G. (2000) *African Literatures in English*, Edinburgh Gate. Pearson Education Limited.
- Killam ,G..(1980) *Introduction to the Writings of Ngugi* by, London, Heinemann.
- Ngugi wa Thiongo (1965)*The River Between*. London, Heinemann.
- Obiechina,E. 1990. *Language and Theme: Essays on African Literature*. Washington, DC: Howard University Press
- Palmer, E. (1972) “The Criticism of African Literature” *African Research Bulletin*, vol II, no.4 pp, 52-69
- Prasansak,R. (2004)*Imagining Kenya in Ngugi’s Fiction*, unpublished thesis,Oregon State University .
- Robson, C. (1979) *Nugget wa Thiongo* , London, Macmillan.