



A Study on Socio-Political Dynamics in Ngugi wa Thiongo: *The River Between*

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Abstract— *The majority of African authors' books are reflections of their diverse societies or groups. Similarly, Ngugi eloquently depicts the culture and traditions of his rural Kenyan society in The River Between. The book takes place in Central Kenya in the 1930s, a time before the country became independent from colonial rule. The novel's themes—a fight for leadership and the impact of European culture and religion on Africans—are described in a very realistic manner. One may argue that the novel could have been set in any other African nation because tales of power struggles and cultural and religious conflicts are typical of European settlers in Africa. To critically examine, analyse, and evaluate Ngugi's work's values and contribution to literature is the primary goal of selecting to critique it for study. African writers and critics have differing opinions on what exactly constitutes African literature. Most African authors search for appropriate definitions of "African Literature" because of this. The quest for a new national narrative is what may be called the story of The River Between. The conflict in The River Between occurs between the various members of a community when they come into contact with a new, foreign philosophy. This foreign ideology quickly interferes with the society's main ideological paradigm as it makes its way into the intellectual fabric of the society, upsetting its equilibrium. We can see how the tribes and villages in the story were living in a state of social harmony and stability because everyone wholeheartedly accepted one particular set of beliefs and practises and adhered to it, even though we may not be able to read it explicitly in the text.*



Keywords— *Socio political dynamics, European settlers, social harmony, Ideology.*

INTRODUCTION

Ngugi wa Thiongo's book "*The River Between*" chronicles the first white European settlers in Kenya. The ancient ways of life of the Kenyan people were put to the test by the revolutionary upheaval that their arrival sparked. The novel uses the fact that the two populations whose lives were impacted by the presence of the Europeans reside on opposite banks of the same river to highlight the rift that was produced by their arrival. The colonizers' imposition of a new way of thinking caused a major paradigm shift in the indigenous communities' brains. Either they embraced the "modern world" or they rejected it to preserve the purity of their traditional Kenyan culture. On one side of the river, a

community welcomed the Europeans and their kind of religion. Another community fought to keep their tribe's autonomy. Therefore, even though the river connected the two communities that were situated along its banks, it also represented a gulf between them and their divergent views of European colonialism.

In his novel, Ngugi narrates the story of a girl whose family decided to convert to Christianity. The young lady had made the decision to have her circumcision performed ceremonially, which the tribe believed would mark her entry into womanhood and indicate that she was prepared for marriage. She eventually passes away as a result of surgical complications, and even her passing is perceived in

two very different ways. Some believed it to be a sign that the spirits were upset because of the new faith. Others said circumcision should be banned because they saw it as the inevitable outcome of an outdated belief system. The girl's passing also stood for the denial of the notion that these two opposed points of view could ever be reconciled. Another key character in Ngugi's narrative is a young man by the name of Waiyaki. He was already regarded as having extraordinary abilities at a young age. One time, Waiyaki saw two youngsters fighting and intervened to end the altercation. Despite being the youngest of the three, he managed to stop the fighting. According to Ngugi, the three boys, Waiyaki, Kamua, and Kinuthia, are all destined to attend a nearby missionary school and eventually become teachers. Eventually, Waiyaki enrolls at the school at his father Chege's request. The mythology of a messiah who would be born in their community and do great things for his people is explained to young Waiyaki by him. The father of Waiyaki thinks he is that Savior. Despite his scepticism of such a fantasy prophecy, Waiyaki does exceptionally well in school and is on the right track to contributing significantly to the advancement of his people. Chege's enthusiasm to send Waiyaki to the mission school is significant because the boy would be able to absorb colonists' knowledge there. With this information, he would be better prepared to fight the colonial authorities. Waiyaki must take care to avoid accepting the colonial system despite the freeing possibilities of this knowledge because doing so would betray the aim of his training.

The conflict between the two villages widens as the narrative goes on, and the community is greatly divided over the proposed circumcision of the little girl Muthoni. Her passing prompts the missionary school, where Waiyaki is a student, to take drastic measures, even kicking out kids whose parents still practise circumcision. Waiyaki is one of the students expelled from the institution. He decides to accept the challenge of constructing a school for the expelled kids in retaliation. He gradually comes to understand that his goal is to make it possible for the village youngsters to have an education, even though he is still unsure of the leadership position his father foresaw him assuming. He becomes so focused on achieving this objective that he neglects to acknowledge and take care of the other needs of his people, such as regaining the areas that the colonists had taken over. A few peasants start plotting behind closed doors, eventually creating the clandestine Kiama organisation, whose sole goal is to maintain the tribe's integrity. This turmoil causes Waiyaki to gain enemies. One of them is Kabonyi, who starts to incite local dissidents to undermine and demolish Waiyaki. Waiyaki eventually falls victim to Kabonyi's deception. He wants nothing more than to calm the village's escalating

turmoil and ease the tension among the populace, but colonialism's polarizing effects are beyond his control. Waiyaki holds himself accountable for not addressing the lack of unity promptly. The narrative comes to a foreboding conclusion. The Kiama must inevitably decide the fate of Waiyaki and his new love interest Nyambura because they are in their care.

The 1950s in Africa saw the rise of a large number of writers who produced their creative works to benefit African literature. In their writings, Achebe and Ngugi discuss the impacts of colonization. Ngugi, who shares the same perspective of attributing the colonizer's domination for upending the traditional system of African tribes in general, intended to struggle against how the new African leaders were governing. Because of this, the historical setting in which *Things Fall Apart* and *The River Between* were written marks the end of White colonialism.

In his book, Ngugi discussed the ethnic conflicts and fractures among the tribes brought on by the colonizers' eagerness to replace the traditional rituals. His viewpoints hold that colonization continues to be the root of many issues, including the new rulers' exploitation of African people, the split of tribes, the loss of identity, and the corruption of the new political order. In this regard, Ngugi shares Achebe's objective of increasing public awareness and educating the populace about the realities of a deceitful government. Ngugi also strived to alleviate and resolve every issue that Africans in Kenya and elsewhere faced during and after the cruel colonial system.

When read analytically, the novel has a relatively straightforward structure that is based on the Gikuyu creation myth, folklore, and visual patterns. These themes—culture clash and the battle for leadership—are at the centre of the story. The novel's first sentence serves as a microcosm of its whole structure:

The Kamen and Makuyu ridges were adjacent to one another.

There was a valley between them.

The valley of life was there.

Numerous further valleys and ridges lay aimlessly behind Kamen and Makuyu. (TRB, Xiii)

They resembled numerous dormant lions that will never awaken. They simply dozed off during their creator's long, deep sleep.

The reader is simply given an understanding of how calm the Gikuyu country and Kenya were before the arrival of the Europeans by the description of geographical elements.

The two ridges, Kamen and Makuyu, were engaged in a power war. The inhabitants of these two ridges arrived

intending to colonize the locals after settling among them and bringing missionary activities. Some Gikuyus converted to Christianity and established Makuyu as their stronghold, while those who chose to uphold their traditional ways remained Kameno as their focal centre. Two young shepherds fighting in the fields is how the book begins. Both of them were from Makuyu; one was from Kameno. They are divided by the main character Waiyaki, a fellow shepherd, who reminds them of the oath they had made to be allies:

“Kamau, halt this immediately. Didn't we pledge that we were allies from the hills?”(5)

After Waiyaki gave birth to his second child, not long after, his father Chege brought him to the sacred grove. He read to him the prophecy of the revered Gikuyu prophet Mugo wa Kibiro concerning the promise of a savior:

“From the hills shall come salvation. I declare that a son will emerge from the same tree from the blood that flows through me. His responsibility will be to guide and protect the populace.”(20)

Later, Chege sent Waiyaki to Siriana Mission School so the missionaries could educate her. He is cautioned not to depart from the tribe's customs, nonetheless. This became the essential component for the prophecy's fulfilment:

“Arise. Respect the warning. Visit the mission and discover the white man's knowledge and secrets. But don't imitate his bad habits. Stay true to your culture and the traditional rituals.”(25)

During one of the school holidays, Waiyaki made a trip home to undergo circumcision alongside his friends, both males and females. Mathoni, the pastor's daughter in Makuyu, fled away from her Christian family to Kameno to undergo circumcision as well. In the process, she perishes. The antagonism between traditionalists and Christian converts grew, and everyone found to still follow tribal practices was ejected from Siriana School.

Mushroom schools started to appear in the area with Waiyaki's assistance as a teacher to educate and improve the ridge people. The first independent schools in Gikuyu were established as a result. While Waiyaki worked diligently to educate the ridges, Kabonyi and a small group of others who had similarly rejected the new faith returned to the ridges and established the Kiama to safeguard the ridges' cultural purity. Waiyaki garnered notoriety and the public's admiration as he rose to stardom. Ngugi claims that his celebrity spread like a bushfire:

“So his fame grew from ridge to ridge and spread like fire in a dry bush”(89)

While observing Waiyaki's fame, Kabonyi—the only person who was also aware of the ancient prophecy of a savior—felt that if nothing was done, he would lose. As a result, he enraged Waiyaki, and Ngugi says:

“A young guy who becomes a leader is constantly the object of envy from those who are on par with him, from those who are older than him, and from those who believe they could have been greater leaders.”

The main character, Waiyaki, ignored the pressing issues of his people because he was preoccupied with his mission to educate the ridges. He initially joined the Kiama but left soon after. Little did he realize that by leaving the Kiama, his rivals Kabonyi and Kamau, his son, would have a chance to outsmart him. Waiyaki was replaced as the Kiama's secretary by Kamau. Despite all of the opposition from his people, Waiyaki fell in love with Nyambura, Joshua's older daughter.

Instead, he continued to travel to Joshua's church and Makuyu. After rising against his father's strict religious mistreatment of her, Nyambura ultimately decided to wed him. Waiyaki and Nyambura were both sentenced to stand trial before the Kiama at the assembly of the elders and residents of the ridges. Kabonyi, the adversary, was aware too clearly that he would have an advantage over Waiyaki, his opponent. Waiyaki departs the ridges for the city with his beloved, Nyambura, after being declared a traitor by the elder council.

Ngugi wrote *The River Between* in 1965 as a depiction of Kikuyu life during colonialism. He made explicit reference to the effects of the arrival of the white man and all the changes that resulted. Ngugi challenges the idea of history in this book as he seeks to reclaim the suppressed African history that existed before colonialism by drawing on Gikuyu traditional practices.

The novel is scattered across "the two peaks that lay side by side. One was a Makuyu, and the other was a Kameno (Ngugi, 1965: 1). In fact, Ngugi's description of both ridges in the first chapter may show how the tribes are connected because they are in each other's faces. However, as the plot moves in different directions, we realize that the connecting factor is that both ridges developed into antagonists for the first time. In Ngugi's words, which emphasize the clash between the two philosophies and focus on issues like circumcision, which is required in Kameno and detested in Makuyu, the division between the two ridges gave rise to far too many disputes.

It can be seen from this chapter how colonialism affected the social, political, and religious life of Joshua's tribe. Therefore, this latter rejects the outdated culture and customs of the second village, whose residents seek to preserve the tribe's independence in favor of embracing

white men and the Christian world. Instead, the river that formerly symbolized unification, healing, and joining, since it runs between Kameno and Makuyu, is now the river that separates under colonial powers because of the arrival of white people. Ngugi once more identifies change and split as the most significant effects of colonialism in these communities. They joined it.

The collision that occurs between Kameno and Makuyu is a powerful example of how colonialism succeeded in isolating each town from the others. As of now, colonialism's impacts are not limited to creating such oppositions of other and self between the colonizer and the colonized, but it also sows a grain of conflict among the colonized tribes themselves. Additionally, the Gikuyu seers like Mugo Wa Kibiro, who predicted the arrival of the white men, disavowed Makuyu practices such as girls' circumcision, witchcraft, and fortune telling. Ngugi writes, "There shall come a people with garments like butterflies." The phrase "These were the white men" also establishes a conflict zone for the other tribes. In this setting, colonialism imposes the idea that the first tribe, the Makuyu, has a superior culture and civilization, while the Kameno, whose customs and ceremonies are highly venerated by the clansmen, are considered primitivists.

In *The River Between*, the attempt to outlaw what the Christian missionaries viewed as the barbarous practice of female circumcision is explored. As a result, it makes it impossible for both towns' existence to be based on the two clashing beliefs. Both sides were blinded by jealousy, hatred, and resentment because these conflicts highlight how Ngugi's characters reject foreign culture. Joshua believed that Christianity was the only way to gain authority and wisdom. When he first heard these words: "This tribe's life is in deep darkness," he realised how much and gave up his tribe's rites.

Those who reject him are the offspring of darkness, and they will spend eternity in Hell as the sons and daughters of the devil. More, end of the world. (28)

It learns about colonialism's huge blending of religions and beliefs as the personalities are gradually introduced to us. As a result, people are caught in a broader context of customs and behaviour with which they may or may not agree. Again, colonialism has a significant impact on both tribes' ideology and divides the tribespeople into two rival groups, the Kameno and the Makuyu. The difficulties brought on by colonialism are implied by the conflicting characters, according to Ngugi.

Waiyaki establishes a hybrid subject for himself by having a dual understanding of both his ancestral culture and that of the white man. Despite being the main character in Ngugi's story, the mixture that holds the character represents his whole perplexity. Waiyaki bases his belief in his ability to save his people on an old tribal prophecy that Chege told him: "Salvation shall come from the hills." I assert that a son should arise from the same tree from whose blood drips on me. Remember that you are the last person in this line, as he has the responsibility of leading and saving the populace. For Waiyaki to comprehend that salvation is required to bring both tribes together, the prophecy helped him develop his mind from an early age. Waiyaki, therefore, strives to mend the wound caused by the battles between the two tribes. In addition, the protagonist wants to use education to raise awareness among the next generation to end colonialism.

Waiyaki did heed his father's advice to learn from him rather than toe the path of the white men. As a result, he blended elements of both worlds because the Siriana School had an impact on his thinking. Waiyaki was able to comprehend that education might be the key to the two tribes' redemption as a result. His father, Chege, who is from the same tribe as him and whose culture is closely bound to tradition, has a significant influence on him.

In *The River Between*, the author advocates for the portrayal of a core view that would always be true to their people's culture. The perception that they were losing the elements that make up their identity is one of the key factors that led colonized peoples to revolt against colonial powers. He continued by portraying how simple and traditional life was in earlier times before the coming of the white men to accomplish a goal that Ngugi fully shares. As a result, the story also addresses the issue of change brought about by colonialism; in other words, the transition from traditional life to the axis of modernity was not easy. However, it experienced catastrophic periods, marked by rejection from some, acceptance from others, and a potential desire for establishing rapprochement between the two cultures from others. Additionally, if we consider how myths and traditions are used in both pieces, we must comprehend how crucial it is to use these elements to strengthen the precolonial identities of those who will later be impacted by colonization.

As we investigate the ideas of tradition and modernity, we learn that tradition is the lens through which we interpret the past, whereas modernity is the lens through which we view the present and the future in a way that is independent of the past and tradition. Therefore, tradition is "a belief of behavior transmitted from one generation to the next and accepted as Authoritative, or differed against, without

justification," according to British philosopher H.B. Acton. As a result, tradition can be seen as a tool to enhance modernity, as modernity cannot exist without first being introduced to tradition. As modernity is the application of oppressive forces that appear to impose a change-bringing ideology that would unquestionably reject the fundamental canons of tradition.

We must first understand that Africans are primarily rural, village-conscious, and tradition-oriented people who are locked in a state of transition between tradition and modernity, and to analyse the significance of utilizing myths and oral traditions that are invoked in the work. The clash between tradition and modernity is only imposed with the arrival of white missionaries, which is why it is thought that the dualism of the two forces is a result of colonialism. Tradition in African art represents the pre-colonial eras of African nations, when the native culture rose to be the tribes' respect for themselves and their dignity. Modernity, on the other hand, stands in for the post-colonial period when the native culture has finally been tainted and polluted by the Western one. We can observe some ambivalence in people's attitudes toward alien culture and behavioural patterns when the purity of African culture is exposed to contemporary metropolitan society. In this instance, the cultural divide serves to highlight yet another effect of colonialism in a country where tradition and modernity coexist to spark a contentious argument.

The story offers realistic depictions of African life, including the rituals and traditions that Gikuyu people once practised. Considering this, it is crucial to remember that African culture was predominantly oral, with stories used to pass along historical information to younger generations. Songs, myths, folktales, and proverbs are frequently employed throughout Ngugi's book to describe the characters and the current state of the African countries.

Ngugi builds *The River Between* on the events that result from cultural preconceptions to highlight the negative effects of such prejudices and how they can sabotage the peaceful togetherness that a particular culture values. Because of the differences and conflicts that developed among the indigenous, we can observe different positions held by the Gikuyu people toward those distinct civilizations by evaluating the attitudes and reactions of the characters.

The River Between's narrator appears to connect the rhythms of the natural world to those of the human world at key points, as he seems to be implying that the human world draws its founding legitimacy and authority from nature. As an illustration, the portrayal of the two tribes in the beginning implies a complementary duality between nature and humanity. Ngugi illustrates this sarcastically by

depicting the effects of colonization as geographic divisions, with Kameno and Makuyu standing in for a real conflict and the Honia River representing the harmony and reconciliation between the two opposed tribes, as follows:

"The two ridges were next to one other. Both were named Makuyu, and one was Kameno. There was a valley in between them. The valley of life was its given name."

There were numerous additional valleys and ridges lying randomly behind Kameno and Makuyu. They resembled several dozing lions that never stirred. The two ridges stopped being sleeping lions bound together by their common source of life when you were standing in the valley. They developed a rivalry(1).

In this context, telling some mythical stories from Ngugi's *The River Between* would also help to clarify how, during the pre-colonial era, identity was inextricably linked to local culture, traditions, and beliefs. For instance, when we introduce the character of Chege, we creatively depict him as being such a wise old guy because of the numerous legends that surround him, such as "some people thought that he had the gift of magic. Others claimed he was a seer and that Murungu, who would rescue people in their hour of need, frequently communicated to him. They claimed he could see future visions like Mugo wa Kibiro, the famous seer.

A key idea in *The River Between* illustrates how the most prominent characters transition from the security of their conventional society to the new one that the colonizer develops. Such characters' hybridity in this work is only conceivable if an outside force forms a wave of transformations. Both Achebe and Ngugi's novels can be analysed from the same literary standpoint when colonialism is taken into consideration.

Most of the time, Waiyaki, the main character, appears to live in both the new world created by colonialism and the ancestral world of tradition. He leans on the expertise of the white world, even if he eventually stays true to his own tribal culture and history. In contrast to Waiyaki, whose father advised him to acquire the wisdom of the white men without completely following their tracks, he was destined to study under the Reverend Livingstone of Siriana Mission along with his pals Kamau and Kinuthia. Characters like Waiyaki struggle to combine characteristics of the two cultures to which they belong and run the risk of being rejected by both communities as a result, which highlights how colonialism causes a significant uncertainty in identity.

Waiyaki, the main character, also gets a description of a picture that resembles Christ. He comes from a long line of prophets, including Mugo wa Kibiro. Because of this, Waiyaki has popularity among his people and is compared to Christ. A further quality that draws him nearer to Christ

is the prophecy his father gave him, which states that he will be the Savior of his people and that "Salvation shall come from the hills. I declare that a son will emerge from the same tree as the blood that flows through me. And he has a responsibility to guide and defend the populace (Ngugi: 20). The mystery of Chege's son becoming a Savior is revealed to him in poetic lines and Biblical terminology, which lends the prophesy purity and increases its veracity. Furthermore, the use of such a biblical allusion promotes a deeper comprehension of how Ngugi himself alludes to the dualism of both his culture and Christianity, which may ultimately reflect his linguistic, cultural, and religious hybridity.

Waiyaki becomes known as "Teacher" and "Shepherd of his people," underscoring his similarities to Christ in the story as his character development progresses. As a result, to honour and respect the person they are waiting to lead them, people have begun to refer to him as a teacher or a shepherd, with the capitalization of these terms appearing to be necessary in the same way that Christ's name is always capitalized.

Waiyaki decides to go a different route to unite the two clans. He has a strong belief in the ability of education to improve the unfortunate situation of cultural clash. As a result, he establishes a school in Kamenio called Mariosioni, the first one since Siriana broke off its relationship and refused to accept students who were "children of darkness, whose parents had not forsaken the whole concept of circumcision." His education in self-help strengthens his desire to serve his country because he is seen as the savior of his people. Therefore, Waiyaki believes that building education through a process will provide a middle ground where salvation can be attempted. Waiyaki was initially educated in Siriana, but he was never able to give up the customs of his clan. He does not like to be associated with either side as a result, and he is now dedicated to reconciliation. Due to his alienation and perception by his people, Waiyaki chooses to forge his world, one of "reconciliation" with tradition and bearing of the new identity, rather than attempting to fit in with any of the tribes.

Waiyaki is also rejected by his companion Kinuthia, who "sought to hide himself in the crowd as though he did not want to be connected with the instructor," as it is stated in the last chapter, when he is discovered in "the great hour of need." As Christians believe, this circumstance is comparable to the account of Jesus in which his companion Peter betrays him. When Waiyaki compares himself to Christ in the book, he acknowledges that similarity. When he meets Nyambura beside the river, for instance, he imagines that it is like "if she and he were together standing

on an altar ready for a sacrifice," which is comparable to Christ's offering of himself. Additionally, he admits that "[a]fter all, he appreciated certain Christian teaching," which demonstrates his identity with Christ by saying that "the anguish of Christ in the Garden of Gethsemane and His agony on the tree had always impacted him." Finally, Waiyaki and Christ both suffer judgement from their followers towards the novel's conclusion, with Waiyaki being subject to the Kiama's judgement. Ngugi then goes on to describe Waiyaki as being like Christ, continuing to use a blend of biblical allusions in his vocabulary, such as by predicting the tale of Christ within Waiyaki's life.

In *The River Between*, other major characters also have a sense of identity disorientation. For example, Muthoni, Joshua's little daughter, encounters enormous difficulty since she identifies with both her tribe and Christianity, which her father considers to be wholly incompatible. Her willingness to undergo circumcision is evidence that she will always have a conscience that is connected to the customs of the opposing tribe. Despite being mostly forewarned by her strict father, a Christian preacher, Muthoni feels that circumcision is necessary. In Ngugi's words:

Father, however, will not permit it. He's going to be furious with you. You are a Christian, therefore how can you even consider it. By now, both of us are knowledgeable in white people's customs. Father has been imparting to us the knowledge he gained at Siriana. And as you may already be aware, missionaries dislike when girls are circumcised. Jesus said it was sinful and improper. (Ngugi, 1965)

Since both African and non-African readers are intended for the book, Ngugi writes in English. In both his narrative and dialogue, he employs very straightforward and clear language. Ngugi has his characters speak in straightforward English. They don't use proverbs when speaking. The vocabulary of a young, educated individual like Waiyaki or Joshua and that of a village elder like Chege is quite similar. Proverbs are replaced with symbols, imagery, and biblical language in Ngugi. The phrase "two lions" is used to describe the two ridges. The ridges appear to be at odds with one another when seen from the valley, as if they are staring each other in the eye. This creates an undercurrent of sarcasm. The Honia River, whose name means "cure" and is described to as the "soul of the ridges," bringing life to everything in the narrative, is another sarcastic unity-in-division symbol. The church in Makugu derives inspiration from Honia when the two ridges separate, and on its bank, traditional religion is practiced. The Whiteman are also referred to as butterflies by Chege. The novel's mix of Christian and Gikuyu mythology by Ngugi is yet another

important ironic metaphor. The novel serves as a poignant commentary on the impacts of colonialism, importance of cultural heritage and the ongoing struggle for social cohesion in the face of external pressures.

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