



THE RIVER BETWEEN: ASSERTION OF INDIGENOUS CULTURAL IDENTITY AND AMBIENCE

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ABSTRACT

The Term culture although popularly associated with artistic activities only encompasses, more than that and is inevitably linked up with a people's way of living whether they comprise a village, a clan, a tribe or a nation. Ngugi puts it: "the sum of their art, their science and all their social institutions, including their system of belief and rituals." (Homecoming: p.4). *The River Between* sheds light on the importance of love, education and the need for reconciliation between antagonistic beliefs represented by Christianity on the one hand and indigenous tribal beliefs and values on the other.

The river Honia divides the Christianized half of the tribe from the traditional Gikuyu tribe, but it also symbolizes sentence and new growth. The river Between is sought to be analyzed in terms of the ancient wisdom embedded in the ways of hills and the creation of myth of Gikuyu people and a strong yearning for peace and reconciliation between the two holistic groups inhabiting the two ridges of kameru and Makuyu.

It examines and evaluates Kenyan history through the two most significantly symbols of cultural clash between the natives and the foreign invaders namely education and religion. It discovers the cultural ethos of the society. It explores and identifies the roots of the society and social religious contest. It depicts the texture of life of the Gikuyu people in the central land of Kenya in the 1920s.

Keywords: *Culture, Rituals, Indigenous, Ancient Wisdom, Reconciliation, Ethos, Education.*

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The novel *The River Between* is sought to be analysed in terms of the ancient wisdom embedded in the “ways of the hills” and the creation Myth of the Gikuyu people and a strong yearning for peace and reconciliation between the two hostile groups inhabiting the two ridges of Kameno and Makuyu. The seminal issue in *The River Between* is the significance of land which is not only the source of livelihood, but also serves as the medium of forging spiritual bonds with the people. The novel revolves round the Gikuyu creation myth according to which Murungu, the Gikuyu God, told the people: *This land I give to you, O man and woman. It is yours to rule and till* (Ngugi: 1965, P2)

The River Between is Ngugi's maiden attempt at novel writing, although Ngugi himself declares that it is his second published novel. It is for this reason of having been written first and also because of the fact that the period of Kenyan history dealt within *The River Between* is prior to that of *Weep Not, Child* that we shall discuss *The River Between*, first. In this novel, Ngugi critically examines and evaluates, primarily through the aspect of Christianity, the cultural clash between the Africans and the foreign invaders. According to Killam, ‘the life in his (Ngugi's) novels is shaped by the presence of Christianity and his first novel *The River Between* was written when he was a devout Christian. Christianity is a major influence in both the colonial and neo-colonial novels of Ngugi.(1980 pp.7) Traditional religion and Christianity, the clashes between the two tribes and the scheming nature of reformers and statesmen etc., find place in the novel. The leadership is very much distanced from the throng. In the words of David Cook,

The novel depicts a situation in which a properly unified programs me for defending the integrity of indigenous society is dangerously spilt between rival polities. Education and Political activism, instead of being partners, became antagonist (Cook David: 1983 p.27)

The River Between dramatizes the lives of two factions of a Gikuyu clan living on the two ridges, called Kameno and Makuyu, on either side of a valley called ‘the valley of life’. The river flowing through the valley is called Honia which, as Ngugi

informs us, means ‘cure or bring back to life’. The ridges when seen from a distance appeared to be ‘antagonists’: *You could tell this, not by anything tangible but by 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* (Ngugi: 1965,p7)

This description of the physical shapes of the ridges in a way sets the tone of the novel. It is learnt that the people of the two ridges too are ‘antagonists’ and are locked in ‘a life and death struggle for the leadership of the isolated region’. Ngugi's idea of an African hero of colonial occupation originates in the pre-independence, pro-literary tradition in Kenya (Glinga: 1986, p.213.) This shows the impact of cultural exploitation of the whites on the Africans. Thus in *The River Between*, Ngugi presents the picture of a Gikuyu hero who stands as a weak willed person after the havoc played by the European colonies in Kenya.

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. Waiyaki's father, Chege, is a well known elder of Kameno, who is respected and feared at the same time, respected because he ‘knows the meaning of every ritual and every sign’ and feared because ‘he could see visions of future’. Mixing myth and reality, Ngugi tells us that Chege was related to the mythical character of Mugo, the great Gikuyu seer. Like Mugo of the great Gikuyu myth, Chege too had predicted the coming of the ‘butterflies’ to their ridges. His prediction had come true when Livingstone came amongst them. Joshua and Kabonyi converted to the new faith, ‘abandoning the ways of the ridges’. Chege, however, is now old and wishes to see the other part of Mugo's prophecy fulfilled which had predicted that a saviour of the Gikuyu would arise from amongst his own clan and drive the white people away from the ridges. Chege pins his hopes on his son Waiyaki whom he tells one day:

Without anybody's knowledge except his father's, Waiyaki disappears from the ridges and lands up in Siriana where he was placed under the guidance of Reverend Livingstone. His intelligence and progress at the institution was keenly observed by the white missionaries who visualized in him a



'possible brave Christian leader of the church'. Wayaki's sojourn at Siriana Mission underlines a crucial aspect of the colonized African consciousness where Western education was perceived by many Africans as a vital and strategic need in the bid to achieve liberation. Ngugi now shifts the scene and takes us to the other ridge - Makuyu. Joshua was among the first to be 'saved'. He has two daughters - Nyambura and Muthoni. On a particular fateful day, the younger one, Muthoni, confides in her sister Nyambura that she wants to be circumcised. As daughters of a Christian, they both knew that the very thought of a circumcision, a tribal rite observed obligatorily by both boys and girls at the beginning of puberty, is 'sinful'. By showing this intense desire for a tribal rite in the hearts of the children of a devout Christian, Ngugi provides a concrete instance of a cultural conflict between the native Africans - represented here by Chege and other residents of Kameno - and the White European missionaries and the African converts, here represented by Livingstone, Joshua and other residents of Makuyu.

The cultural significance of the ritual of circumcision as an embodiment of initiation into adulthood is deftly handled by Ngugi who projects the antagonism between the two ridges through the implications it develops further on. In marked contrast to Muthoni's approach to reconcile the Gikuyus of Kameno and Makuyu, stands the figure of her father Joshua whose conversion to an alien faith makes him blind to the politico-economic, social and cultural implications of Christianity. His aversion for his tradition and culture only sub serves the grand design of the colonizers who had deliberately put the bait of Christianity in their bid to pursue the policy of political and economic domination.

Muthoni is determined 'to be a real girl, a real woman, knowing all the ways of the hills and ridges'. Lloyd Williams observes: 'Christianity can't be meaningful to her if it attempts to meet her outside the tribe, outside of her life in the tribe'. In other words, what Muthoni wants to both christianity and the tribe, (1969, p.75) When she decides to go away to her aunt in Kameno quietly and get herself 'initiated' Waiyaki too is a candidate for the ceremony, although his attitude against these tribal customs is one of guilt, thanks to his years at Siriana.

The story, however, takes a strange turn when Muthoni becomes seriously ill, as her wound does not heal. The people of Kameno blame it all on Joshua who they believe must have put a father's curse on her. She is shifted to Siriana mission hospital where she dies, clinging to her dream of reconciling with the two: tribal religion and Christianity. Her dying words, spoken to Waiyaki are, " *Tell Nyambura, I see Jesus. And I am a woman, beautiful in the tribe*" (Ngugi: 1965, P61) Muthoni's sacrifice further aggravated the tensions between Kameno and Makuyu. Instead of making the people realize the need for unity and integration, her death eventually hardened their conservative outlook. For the Christians, it was a punishment from God for being in league with the Devil. Circumcision confirmed the primitive barbarity of Gikuyu customs. The 'enlightened' Christians viewed her as being tempted to the evil ways of Satan and further strengthened their resolve to crush Gikuyu culture and tradition.

Mariosioni, as Waiyaki's school is called, inspires the people all around for self-help in education and such schools - people's own schools - grow up like mushrooms even if these were 'nothing more than a shed hurriedly thatched with grass'. While Waiyaki works for his school from morning till evening like a man possessed, he is worried about the deepening rivalry between the people of the two ridges - the tribals and the Christians. He feels 'himself standing outside all this', completely 'isolated' and confused. He yearns to reconcile the two through education.

The River Between deals with the disintegration of a traditional Kenyan society under pressure from within and without - pressure from within being of a rigid, obscurantist, traditional people governed by secret sacred oaths of the clan, people who refuse to move towards modernization and the pressure from without being that of ruthless self-opinionated European people with superior technology. The disintegration is tragic for people like Muthoni and Waiyaki who are neither rigid about a totally traditional way of life nor keen about a totally modern, Christian way of life. Since they do not identify themselves completely either way, not only are their efforts of reconciling the mutually exclusive systems frustrated by extremists like Kabonyi and



Joshua but they themselves meet tragic ends. Muthoni, though born in a Christian family in Kameno, dies while undergoing initiation rites of female circumcision and Waiyaki, though born in a family of traditional seers in Makuyu, awaits a possible death at the hands of the Kiama - the secret sect - for intending to marry Nyambura, an uncircumcised Christian girl.

Waiyaki's obsession throughout the novel 'except towards the very end', with education as the panacea for all the ills of the traditional society at cross roads of modernization represents not only Ngugi's own personal faith in education during the earlier phase of his life but also of a whole generation of the African population. This is what Jomo Kenyatta has to say about the mood in 1929 when during the Kenyan freedom struggle the people of Kenya were threatened with the withdrawal of the mission school facilities for the children of those parents who practised either female circumcision or polygamy. However, the African, having no other choice superficially agreed to fulfill those conditions in order to get the little education which the missionary schools afforded him. The education, especially reading and writing was regarded as the Whiteman's magic, and thus the young men were very eager to acquire the new magical power, a fact which undoubtedly had escaped the notice of the Europeans. (*Kenyatta :1979, P, 272*)

So much taken up is Waiyaki with the idea of education that he ignores even the machinations of Kabonyi against him: "Kabonyi did not exist. He saw only schools, schools everywhere and the thirst that burned the throats of so many children who looked up to him for the quenching water.... Education was life". Only towards the end does Waiyaki realize that his obsession with education has caused more harm than good. In a moment of self-criticism he realizes: *Oh, there are so many things I did not know. I had not seen that the new awareness wanted expression at a political level. EDUCATION FOR AN OPPRESSED PEOPLE IS NOT ALL.* (Ngugi : 1965,P160)

In fact, in the character of Waiyaki, Ngugi portrays very effectively the inherent contradictions in the desire of the Kenyans going all out to acquire western education in order to equip themselves with knowledge which they hoped to use for freeing

themselves from the colonial rule but in the very process of acquiring it, becoming alienated from not only their customs and rites but also from the people themselves. Chege urges his son Waiyaki to go to Siriana:

You go there. I tell you again, learn all the wisdom of the Whiteman. And keep on remembering salvation shall come from the hills. A man must rise and save the people in their hour of need. He shall show them the way; he shall lead them (Ngugi: 1965, P24)

Waiyaki, on the other hand, has developed a sense of guilt about various tribal rituals and customs which Ngugi attributes to his education at Siriana. Waiyaki's absence from the hills had kept him out of touch with those things that most mattered to the tribe. Besides, however much he resisted it, he could not help gathering and absorbing ideas and notions that prevented him from responding simultaneously to those dances and celebrations. But he knew HE HAD TO GO THROUGH INITIATION.

In fact, as Ngugi shows it, the Western system of education has done something worse than just weakening the hold of tribal customs and rituals on the minds of the young. It makes them so pliant that the very idea of disobeying authority, however unjust and oppressive, is repugnant to them. Waiyaki, fails to understand Muthoni's behaviour of coming away from Kameno: The idea that she had actually run away, actually REBELLED AGAINST AUTHORITY somehow shocked him. (Ngugi : 1965,P47)

This ambivalent attitude of Waiyaki's becomes the besetting flaw of his character and is directly responsible for his decision not to throw his lot wholeheartedly with the tribe at a crucial juncture and is also responsible for his tragic end. He sincerely believes that reconciliation is possible. Ngugi shows an equally ambivalent attitude towards Christianity, again through the character of Waiyaki. Although Waiyaki sees himself as the deliverer of his people as the chosen one in Mugo wa Kibira's prophecy, and yet he is attracted to the church:

After all, he himself loved some Christian teaching. The element of love and sacrifice agreed with his own temperament. The suffering of Christ in the Garden of



Gethsemane and His agony on the tree had always moved him.(Ngugi:196,P114)

Waiyaki's ambivalent attitude towards Christianity represents not only Ngugi's own response to Christianity during his youth but also that of a whole generation of Kenyan freedom fighters.

Conceived as an organization to struggle against the colonial forces, it fails to incorporate the collective voice and wisdom. It sways to the skilful persuasions of Kabonyi. The collective will is marginalized when the Kiama accepts Kabonyi's vociferous charges without a substantial and concrete attempt to understand the issue at stake. On the other hand, Wayaki also fails to understand, the collective aspect of his society. The idea of a 'black messiah' leading his people from ignorance to knowledge negates the aspect of collectivism. Relying solely on his own wisdom and strength, Wayaki visualizes himself as a leader leading the people in whatever directions he chooses. There is absolutely no space for discussion and incorporation of collective expression in his scheme of things as he pushes his agenda of education as the instrument for unification.

His Siriana background makes him develop an isolated mindset that does not confide in any one. This eventually leads to his isolation on both the ridges. His understanding of the role of education as an instrument for reconciliation remains locked up within himself while the growing sense of alienation of the people reeling under colonial exploitation demands urgent redressal in the form of political struggle. Realization of this reality comes late and his judgment of the situation appears sentimental and untactful. Through Wayaki's ordeal, Ngugi has deftly presented the theme of disillusionment with Western education conceived as the solution for the ills affecting the colonized African society. This theme continues in his later works with much more acute and critical perspicacity. Thus we see that in his very first novel – *The River Between* - Ngugi wa Thiong'o chooses to critically examine and evaluate Kenyan history through the two most significant symbols of cultural clash between the natives and the foreign invaders, namely education and religion. Dathorne

has suggested that *Ngugi offers little hope and no alternatives in this novel.* (1976, p.128)

This may appear to be so because Ngugi himself was not very clear about the way out from this impasse of Christianity versus tribal ways of life. Waiyaki's confusion is in fact due to Ngugi's own lack of social vision of the future, *a peoples' roots were in their traditions going back to the past the very beginning.* (Ngugi: 1965, P162)*The River Between* seeks to go back to the roots of the society so as to delineate the past in terms of its myths, traditions and rituals. The protagonist, Waiyaki, is cast in a tragic mould. The novel is concerned with the presence of the early missionaries and the resultant culture conflict. Joshua places curse on his only two daughters since they chose to rebel against the Christian faith. As per the curse both the daughters "met an untimely end".

The novelist depicts the arrival of the missionaries and the generous attitude of the natives to them. They invited their brothers to come and take all land. Their country is invaded. The Whiteman's efforts are directed at alienating the people from their lands. The deliberate and bold bid by Muthoni opted for circumcision. Her circumcision not only results in her death but precipitates the matters between the antagonistic ridges. Her circumcision is a valiant gesture of a person who willingly undergoes martyrdom for reconciling the hostile factions. The supreme irony of this sacrifice is the alienation and disaffection it produced among their own people. Waiyaki is conscious of the pitfalls of blind and orthodox beliefs in all that is old and has a compulsive urge for education and enlightenment to counter the regressive features of tribal fetish and superstition. Waiyaki, in a small measure, to strike and analogy, is Gandhian in approach and ultimately falls a martyr to his own convictions.

Ngugi resents the white invasion that dispossesses the natives of their lands by white settlers and disinherits them from their cultural roots. According to Ngugi,

'the role of an African novelist is to delve deep into the collective unconscious of his people to seek to the root, the trend in the revolutionary struggle. (Ngugi: 1972, P162)



Ngugi explores and identifies the roots of the society and the socio-religious contexts. The novel has myths, rituals, traditions and the problem of culture conflict. It depicts the texture of life of the Gikuyu people in central Gikuyu land of Kenya in the 1920s.

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