

## CULTURAL CHANGES IN KENYA DURING THE COLONIAL PERIOD IN THE NOVEL OF NGUGI WA THIONG'O'S IN THE RIVER BETWEEN

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### Abstract

*Colonial rule brought serious changes in Ngugi's Gikuyu community. For Gikuyu, the land is the most revered because they believed it is bestowed by God on to their fore-fathers. The first aspect that shattered their belief was British Land Act. Since they are culturally attached to the land their struggle was immense. The other aspect that influenced Gikuyu was western education. Gikuyu education was informal and playful. It is all about understanding nature, community, social practices and procedures. It is moving from family to community. On the contrary missionary education is formal to promote colonial rule. The most important influence was church which brought changes in their beliefs. Ngugi has equal grip on both. His characters either stick to indigenous beliefs or Christian.*

**Keywords:-** Gikuyu, Ngugi wa Thiong'o, *The River Between*...

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Hermann Hesse is right when he defines culture.

Every age, every culture, every custom and tradition has its own character, its own weakness and its own strength, its beauties and ugliness; accepts certain sufferings as matters of course, puts up patiently with certain evils. Human life is reduced to real suffering, to hell, only when two ages, two cultures and religions overlap... Now there are times when a whole generation is caught in this way between two ages, two modes of life, with the consequence that it loses all power to understand itself and has no standard, no security, no simple acquiescence.

**K**enya had its own society with collective leadership and the most developed social structures of behaviour and their own narratives, songs and dances. With the advent of Christianity the missionaries started looking down the various aspects of cultures. The British colonists felt that the practices were barbaric and tried to impose their own religion on the natives which they consider was 'civilized' and superior. The next attack was on Gikuyu education system which was informal and all knowing about the tribe and its practices and rituals. Missionaries introduced Western education system and that was how the colonists attacked Gikuyu culture by their religion and education so that the colonists could replace their own. But converting into Christianity is a coming out from a set of cultural traditional systems and values that are imbibed into the community. Conversion was in preference to the traditional communal identity. It was not that easy for the Gikuyu community but at the time of Ngugi wa Thiong'o birth, the missionaries were able to convert and a sect of community started embracing Christianity. By enticing people into Christianity, and introducing western education the colonists were able to lure Kenyan people who would help the government and grabbed the land which was a great resource and which Gikuyu believed was bestowed by their God, Gikuyu and Mumbi. But in the course of time even the traditional Gikuyu's started thinking they should be educated to know 'magic' of the white people. At this stage the missionaries denied access to the circumcised boys and the girls to schools. Gikuyu people started their own schools and churches.

Education, cultural oppression, the land deprivation, forced labor became the struggle of Kenyans against colonialism since they are connected with emotions of the people. Some Kenyans insisted on western education and some felt it did more harm than good. Thus Kenyans were divided in the matter at a very crucial moment of history.

Ngugi wa Thiong'o in *The River Between* narrates different aspects of Gikuyu culture; conflict between tradition and modernity and western education influence. The features that dominate are leadership, rituals and myth.

*The River Between* tells the story of Waiyaki, the protagonist. It begins Gikuyu history and prophecy; It is an amalgamation of myth and history. Mugo wa Kabiro informs the arrival of 'people with clothes like butterflies.' (2) People were strong believers of their tradition, secrets of nature and magical powers. Waiyaki's father Chege was elder of Kameno is respected because he knows all the rituals and prophecies and is considered as a leader of traditions and when he was young he believed he was the saviour. When he was rejected by the tribe he places his hopes on his son. His prediction became true when Livingstone had come into their community and Joshua and Kabonyi converted to the new faith. Chege also believed in other part of the Mugo's prophecy which said a saviour would arise from the community and send the white people. Waiyaki father teaches his son the secrets of ridges and makes him realize that he was the offspring of the seer and is declared as a saviour and born to unravel the secrets of white men so that he could defeat them thereby he could save people.

Now listen my son listen carefully... Before Mugo died, he whispered to his son the prophecy, the ancient prophecy: "Salvation shall come from the hills. From the blood flows in me. I say from the same tree, a son shall rise. And his duty shall lead and save the people." (17)

Chege realizes Mugo's prediction with the coming of colonists and sends his son to Siriana school to understand the ways of the white man and to combat with Europeans in a better way. The prophecy inspires him but the same prophecy leads to Waiyaki's destruction.

*The River Between* narrates the imposition of colonial rule basing on the Gikuyu, who had a strong ancestral background, a sect of people converted into Christianity but Ngugi opines Christianity did more harm than good in Kenya. In-between, people are craving for change. It

says about two antagonists, the traditional and the modern. “The two ridges lay side by side. One was Kameno, the other, Makayu. Between them was a valley. It was called the valley of life.” (1) The Makayu represents the people who are converted to Christianity whereas Kameno of traditional Gikuyu and they have become antagonists to get the leadership of the region. The two ridges symbolize the opposing forces, one side Kabonyi and his son Kamau representing Christianity, Chege and Waiyaki, Gikuyu tradition. Waiyaki wanted to build a bridge between tradition and modernity but is caught in many dilemmas which finally consume him. Makayu is the ridge with the people who embraced Christianity and Joshua is the leader of new faith. He is imbued with the Christian ideology followed old testament. He is a bigot of Christian faith. He completely submits himself to Christianity and abandoned everything related to the tradition and rituals. Ironically his own daughter wants to be circumcised to be in the tribe. She wants to be ‘a real girl, a real women knowing all the ways of hills and ridges.’ (29) She believes she can participate in rituals and still be a Christian. This becomes another problem that arises antagonism between the two ridges. Muthoni rebels against his father and his belief. Gikuyu at this point of history strongly believed women should be circumcised and women that are not circumcised would have more sexual desires that may lead to social unrest. It is a deep rooted custom in the tribe and they also insisted uncircumcised women can’t share their bed with husbands and deliver children. Muthoni is a staunch believer of Christianity. She says, ‘A women made beautiful in the tribe, a husband for bed; children to play around the hearth... Yes I wanted to be a woman made beautiful in the manner of the tribe.’ (51)

She absconds and runs away to her aunt for the ‘initiation’. She interprets her actions saying

No one will understand. I say I am a Christian and my father and mother have followed a new faith. I have not run away from that. But also wanted to be initiated into the ways of tribe. How can I possibly remain as I am now? (50)

Unfortunately, Muthoni wound does not heal and eventually she dies. She dies achieving her quest for reconciliation. ‘Tell Nayambura I see Jesus and I am a woman, beautiful in the tribe.’ (61) It is her quest to be in the tribe and be a Christian. Ironically her sacrifice had lost the purpose. Muthoni’s death drives the two ridges apart, instead of bringing the two clans together

it becomes another reason for antagonism. As for Joshua Muthoni's death was God's wrath and God punished the rebel who went against parents and the law of God. But for the tribe it is 'a warning to all to stick to the ways of the land to its rituals and songs.' (62)

The novel reflects Gikuyu life. Muthoni succumbed to the idea of becoming 'a real girl' for circumcision. The clitoridectomy and circumcision rites are very crucial to bring the conflict in the novel which brings identity with the sacred bond of the land. For Chege circumcision is the moral practice of the tribe and is a symbol of unification. For Joshua it is an evil. The history intersects with colonial history. Livingstone fights against Gikuyu customs. For Livingstone, the death was the cause of the brutal mutilation and so Syria has been closed for those who underwent circumcision. Waiyaki was banned from Syria. He wanted to establish independent schools to teach western education. He opened a great number of schools in and around the area. He wanted to reunite the tribe through education. In the process grows as a powerful figure in the tribe. Waiyaki is obsessed with the idea of education and he thought it was a panacea for all the evils of the tribe but he does not realize how that could help. But in the process of gaining it, it takes him away from their customs and rituals. Ngugi believes that western education has done worse by weakening their hold on rituals and cultures.

Leadership is a significant problem which becomes the central part of the power struggle which leads to the destruction of the protagonist. Ngugi wa Thiong'o in *The River Between* scrutinized his important characters as powerful leaders. In the beginning itself we understand the rivalry and the people are caught in between life and death for the sake of leadership. Waiyaki, a sensitive young man is asked to clear the problems at the point of time where he cannot identify his own problems. This problem is seen at different levels with different emphasis. The first seems to be that is derived from the actions of British people. As soon as they start ruling, it is their practice to work with the help of local collaborators. In *The River Between* Joshua is not only an intermediary but also a religious leader. There are more leaders who act for the sake of community. Joshua and Kabonyi struggle for the sake of leadership. Their struggle is more at the personal level. Kabonyi was one of the converts into Christianity like Joshua but for the power enters into the tribe.

Leadership is a problem for the community because of the power that they take. So many leaders fail in delegating their duties or disappoint them or betray them. This is the common

aspect in Ngugi's writing. Waiyaki represents a problematic leadership. Waiyaki's downfall was not because of the misjudgment but because he lost touch with the people. He was very focused for much time and was successful. His aim was to rebuild and reunite the divided tribe. Waiyaki is successful in terms of establishing schools and building confidence and bringing unity in the tribe. But he fails because of the clash between the traditional and cultural attitudes and his approach to unify them. Waiyaki is destroyed by power struggle.

Waiyaki's love to Nayambura which he thought would bridge the gap between two communities leaves him to his fate. As Nayambura was not circumcised, she is not ritually permitted and it was also consorting with Jshoua who is a traitor by following new faith and thus betraying the oath to the community. Chege himself sees as a savior and later attributes it to Waiyaki. This aspect is widespread in this novel. Individuals, personified as saviours of the people is a common theme in Nugugi's writings. Kabonyi wanted to be the prophesied savior and could not even bear the thought of Wayaki becoming the savior. For Kabonyi, it was a personal struggle. Kabonyi's struggle is one sided. Kabonyi as a traditionalist adheres to tribal custom and purity. Waiyaki believes in the unification of cultures, but lacks historical base.

For Wayaki knew that not all the ways of the white man were bad. Even his religion was not essentially bad. Some good, some truth shone through it. But the religion, the faith, need washing, cleaning away all the dirt, leaving only the eternal. And that eternal that was the truth had to be reconciled to the traditions of the people. A people's traditions could not be swept away overnight. That way lay disintegration. Such a tribe would have no roots, for a people's roots were in their traditions going back to the past, the very beginning. (162)

Though there was antagonism between culture and unification, the characters mostly have synthesizing approach for culture. Chege, the elder of the tribe was a traditionalist but sends his son to get the western education. Joshua embraces new faith and colonialism. Muthoni craves for both native and western spirituality. Kabonyi was the most contaminated because he was into Christianity but asks for tribal purity. Muthoni, an uncircumcised woman looks 'Black Messaiah', a saviour in Waiyaki.

Waiyaki's plan of reconstructing the community is not fulfilled and the community is the same divided and Waiyaki becomes the most problematic figure. He is a failed leader. Waiyaki was thrown into many conflicts. He felt he could build the gap between the ridges and could make a balance but was caught among many problems; the tradition and modernity, the two ridges, the Gikuyu and colonial schools, between himself and Nayambura and his community and his personal love. He could not even understand the plotting of Kabonyi. He felt he was the messiah but he was caught in indecision. He spent number of years in the missionary school away from the tribe and he could not get the rituals and the bond with the tribe. Waiyaki is prepared to submit himself to people. He is different from Kabonyi. Kabonyi manipulates and with his political discourse wants to control his audience. He ultimately controls the community. When he was called to give up Nayambura to reaffirm himself to the tribal purity, Waiyaki has wrongly chosen an individual, Nayambura. He failed over his social and moral commitment to the collective that lead to his denunciation. What is needed at this juncture is the need for action rather than ideals. Ngugi explores different sorts of social, behavioral, political and psychological damage that colonialism has brought in into Gikuyu.

Thus Ngugi lays path to the social, political and religious patterns in *The River Between* which will become the most dominated themes in his subsequent writing. He exploits and explores the relationships provided by the historical encounter between the white man Europe and Africa.

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