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The Narrative of Ngugi in the River Between: Colonial and Postcolonial Dispensations

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Abstract

This study examines the representations of tensions between traditional beliefs and modern perspectives through the analysis of Ngugi's *The River Between*. The article scrutinizes to what extent Ngugi writings explores problems that beset his fellow Kenyan People and the Psychological impact of colonialism in their minds. This is a critical and theoretical textual analysis study grounded in Postcolonial theory. The novel under analysis was selected on the basis of its theme which epitomizes the dual opposition of African traditional and modern lives, and as it introduces Balogun's (1997:29) liberal nationalist critique theory which projects radical nationalism based on violence, at one hand, and on the other hand the liberal perspective which envisages that people can conquer their freedom through formal colonialist education. The findings from the textual analysis unravel that Ngugi's *The River Between* projects a failed decolonization given to the alienation system that the African subject experiences when he tries to unite two different cultural realities. The fact that colonial formal education has been considered as an alternative in fighting against colonialism rather than an education based in African cultural principles sets as the motif for the failure of decolonization.

Key words: Hybridity, Colonial education, Traditional education

Introduction

Ngugi's narrative in 'The River Between' portrays in one hand, 'the ironic symbol of the ambiguous future that awaits Africans' in their attempts to fuse what is claimed traditional with what comes from the white man's culture and religion, which may result in the 'disintegration of the indigenous society and the collapse of morale as a result of the gradual encroachment of the white man' (Palmer, 1973:13). The general theme stated above, is epitomized by waiyaki, Muthoni and Nyambura whose attempt to fuse the white man's education and Christian ways of life mirrored by Joshua with the traditional ways of life from the Kamen community portrayed by kabony results in their tragic end. And on the other hand, Ngugi sheds light on the readers on how love can redeem people 'in a world subject to tensions of change when old loyalties are thrown into doubt and the future is fraught with uncertainty' (Rice, 1984).

Irony features prominently in 'The River Between'. The water symbolism and the themes of love, religion and education keep one wondering at the unexpected unfolding of the events. In his critical analysis, Nnolim (1984:138) states that 'water conventionally stands as a symbol for purification, fertility, growth rebirth (or baptism), plus the idea of the flowing of time into eternity'. And he looks at it as a religious interpretation that should not be followed given the fact that Ngugi 'encourages the hope that water stands for life and regeneration,

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while with the other he flashes before our eyes scenes that promise life but lead to death and despair' (ibid:138). Ngugi's aim with the water symbolism is not to flash before readers a sense of a puzzling picture in the readers' eyes but rather to use the river symbolism as a neutral part and source of life that gives hope to dreams dashed for failure.

The role of education in Ngugi's River Between

Education has been portrayed with most writers as the key element used by missionaries to alienate the colonized people from their own cultural beliefs and customs. Vei-wild (1993:188) states that when the white man introduced schooling in the African traditional settings its first aim was to alienate or estrange "African children from their parents and their traditional surrounding-their way of thinking, behaving and speaking...". The establishment of school at Siriana Missionary has as its primary aim the estrangement or alienation of the native children to their own cultural beliefs and tradition and acquaintance with that of the white settler. Unaware of this hidden intention most Gikuyu people send their children to Siriana in order to learn the white man's magic.

In *The River Between*, we learn that one of the main conflicts of the novel revolves around Waiyaki's mission to learn the white man's magic in order to save his people and lead away the white man from the Gikuyu lands. Ngugi uses the prophesized mission to Siriana as a back drop that fuels the protagonist's internal conflicts as well as those from his community which leads the novel's dénouement into a catastrophic one. The protagonist's endeavour to accomplish his mission alienates him from his Gikuyu community and turns him in an in-between or 'the River' as he neither afterwards belongs to kameno nor to Makuyu.

Waiyaki characterizes 'the River' Hoina, set to unite two different ridges, opposing views either in education or in religion. From the education perspective, Waiyaki tries to reconcile his traditional learning acquired through rituals and oral teaching from his father and initiation rites with the white man's formal education and, ended up alienating himself from his own community, which leads to his own downfall. Rice (1984:129) interprets Waiyaki's tragic end as a result of his father's fault on sending him to Siriana Mission to learn the white man's 'magic' to protect the tribe. He argues that Chege failed to understand that 'human beings are the sum total of their experience. Each event they meet with be it of physical, intellectual or spiritual nature, exerts a subtle influence which gradually change their worldview'. On his turn Palmer (1973:23) is of the view that Waiyaki's personal obsession and procrastination overshadowing people's expectation is what leads him to his personal tragic end. I line with the views expressed with the outlined authors though the latter countenances more the failure of Waiyaki's mission to save his tribe than the blemish of his father sending him to school.

What is at stake from Ngugi's portrayal of Waiyaki as a tragic hero, is not the mission he is given by his father to learn the white man's magic: 'Arise. Heed the prophecy. Go to the

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mission place. Learn all the wisdom and all the secret of the white man. But do not follow his vices. Be true to your people and the ancient rites' pp.24, but rather on the way how he relates what he learns at the Siriana Mission school with what his father has warned him to do and the community's expectation. In other words, Waiyaki failed to understand the role of education to his community that of the 'urgent redress in the form of political struggle' (Rao, 2017:21) so that, he could relate what he learnt from the Siriana to his community and heed his father's prophecy. Similarly, Waiyaki, Chege and the community failed as well to understand the role of the education from the white man's perspective. As Rao (2017) in his article 'The River Between: Assertion of indigenous cultural identity and ambience' put it that the education's role from the white man's perspective was to weaken the hold of tribal customs and rituals in the mind of the young. The weakening of Waiyaki's hold on tribal customs is epitomized through his attendance to the initiation rites (he attended sometimes), shift of attention of his mission, whereby he places more attention to the reconciliation and the schools, worst of all; he even dared to attend Joshua's meetings at the church and involved himself on the matter of Muthoni's death. Trepidation and angst overwhelmed his father, mother and the kameno community as well. We read this through the eyes of his father:

The death of Muthoni did not augur well for the future; it might bring further strife. Chege did not like the way his son had become involved in the affair. He feared for him. But he admired Waiyaki; his figure and his youth. He could not say anything to him. Already he found that he could not really understand his son. Would he be corrupt by Siriana? ...he questioned the wisdom of having sent his son to the Mission place. Would he, chege, be punished like Joshua? What of the prophecy? He thought of going to seek a man of his generation with whom he could talk things over, pp.63

Through Waiyaki's tragic end, Ngugi presents before readers the 'theme of disillusionment with western education conceived as the solution for the ills affecting the once colonized African society' (Rao, 2017:21). This theme parallels with Mungoshi's 'Waiting for the Rain' by Charles Mungoshi. Lucifer's going abroad to further his education in order to save his people from poverty and misery. Though Ngugi is pessimist in this novel as one can read through the sad tone of the novel, he offers hope to the readers as the river though separates and unites at the same time, it flows into time eternity. The view offered by Ngugi keeps one wondering if this novel is kind of warning to postcolonial societies that the problems colonization stirred into Africans realms will continue into time eternity as far as the two ridges continue separated.

Shifting Balance of Power from Patriarchal elder to Western educated youth

'Acceptance of European education inevitably entailed a conscious or unconscious acceptance of values, which then, made resistance to the imported culture difficult to sustain' (Schwerdt, 1995:79). The text under discussion intends to usher to the reader at some

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extends with the view from which ‘the acquisition of western education’ rather than ‘empowering Kenyans was rather alienating from their own roots, (Sivasassipoorani, 2017:416). The new role Waiyaki assumes after his coming from mission school to establish local based schools at Kameno community and the kiama, elated the majority in one hand and on the other hand it fired hatred.

The news that spread all over Gikuyu land that Waiyaki was the Teacher and the leader of Kiama did not appeal to Kaboni, Kamu and Joshua at different levels. What we read from Kaboni and his son Kamu’s hatred to Waiyaki is his age and the success spurred upon him at his age: ‘Waiyaki never liked the way Kamau looked at him with his small, sunken eyes, their white flecked brown. They gave him that appearance of cunning that Waiyaki detested. Kamau did not like him either. A young man who rises to leadership is always a target of jealousy for his equals, for those older than himself and for those who think they could have been better leaders’ pp. 73.

There are two conflicting views on Waiyaki’s western education acquisition: those who still hold the tribe’s tradition and, do not go along with the new power transition from the patriarchal elder to the new western educated youth and, those who belief in the new western educated youth. Though most people send their children to the Marioshoni School, some elders still questioned if the education from the white man outwitted the whole education and wisdom they learnt in the tribe. Thus, Kaboni in one of the meetings held by the teacher he questioned:

‘... do you think the education of our tribe, the education and wisdom which you all received, is 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 lion? (109).

As one can observe in the novel, all that people went through at Kameno community is through the elder’s wisdom and experience, everything is based in the prophecy of the elders and ancestors, the coming of the white people who could wear cloth like butterflies, was prophesized though people had turned a deaf hear in it and did not take action. Chege though belongs to the generation of those who hold to old tradition, he holds sway between what is old and modern, that is why he prophesizes that his son should go to the mission and learn the white man’s magic. Ngugi’s portrayal of Chege as an elder who beliefs in hybridism seem to be warning his readers, the conflicts power transition may stir in Africans. Chege is aware that his son is not fully prepared to lead the ways of Kameno people in all their principles, thus he places prominence in the western education to save his people and draw away the white man.

What we can read from this character is his willy-nilly intention of keeping the position of leadership within his clan. His clan has been in a leading position dating from his ancestors until his generation. As he feels unable to continue leadership, he prepares his son to take his position, ignoring one of the most important factors that the tribe took into consideration for the leading position. Chege acknowledges that Kaboni has all that needed to lead the destiny

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of his tribe: ‘chege had told Waiyaki that Kaboni was probably the only other man who knew the real particulars concerning the prophecy’pp.93. Kaboni is also eager to bring leadership of the tribe into his clan, though he always referred to youth as an important factor in the leading position: ‘young man we are old. We have seen a lot and gone through many experiences’ (ibid). He would rather do all that he could to see his son in the position Waiyaki was holding. Strive for leadership is the central conflict that keeps the novel moving. As the events unfold, we keep wondering what might happen to the central character as his antagonist has trapped him to loot him of the position of leadership of the tribe. Waiyaki acknowledged that he was young to lead the destinies of the tribe that is why his concern was no longer on the leadership of the tribe but rather educating and reconciling the tribes that kept aloof:

As his main aim was peace and reconciliation. He puts his words to the proof by resigning the position of the leader of the Kiama and suggests Kamau as the leader. This decision did not quite satisfy Kamau given that his concern was now on the woman he loved most and was in the hands of his best enemy Waiyaki. Kamau has seen Waiyaki and Nyambura together several times and in love affairs. This fact fuelled his anger and now through his position at Kiama, as the strongest element that kept the tribe pure, he spread it along the ridges that the teacher has not respected the oath he has taken. Waiyaki now faces an internal conflict as he is to decide between the woman he loved most and the fulfilment of his father’s prophecy to lead and save his tribe from the white man settler.

Waiyaki keeps wondering if marrying Nyambura wouldn’t be a betrayal to his own tribe. His mother had warned him, if he married would go against the voice of Kiama, which was considered people’s curse, as Kiama represented people. The elders had called Waiyaki to know from him about all those rumours that went around about his joining with Nyambura, his going at the Siriana mission school, and attendance to Joshua’s meeting at the church and the carrying of an impure and dead body of Muthoni. They reminded him that this could contaminate the whole tribe thus he needed cleansing. Waiyaki revealed his going to Mission school that he wanted teachers, and the body he touched was not impure given the fact that she was initiated, and he did not touch her body when she died. But he did not reveal if he attended Joshua’s church and if he was willing to marry Nyambura. His concern now was to have both ridges united rather than keeping them aloof with this tradition that kept them apart.

Waiyaki, Kaboni and Kamau are all of the same view that there is a need of fighting against the colonial enslavement and bring back their tribe to its tradition and belief system. What keep them aloof and at odds are the goals and approaches to be used. While Kaboni, Kamau and some elders target short term goals, whereby violence should be used in order to fight against the white settler and bring back all that is pure to the tribe, Waiyaki targets long term goal whereby education as an end in itself and therefore he ensures all young people have opportunities to learn the white man’s magic and use it as weapon against him:

‘And instead of Waiyaki leading people against these more immediate ills, he was talking of

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more buildings. Were people going to be burdened with more buildings? With more teachers? And was the white man's education really necessary? Surely there was another way out. It was better to drive away the white man from the hills altogether.' (pp. 109).

Balogun (1997:29) called this view as a comparatively mild liberal nationalism criticism, whereby we have the 'radical nationalism, which advocates violence at one hand and on the other hand 'the liberal view which advocates that freedom can be won through formal colonialist education. In the end the tension between these two views is resolved in favour of kaboni and Kamau (ibid.31).

From Voice of Collective to the voice of individual

'Although Ngugi is always concerned to represent the postcolonial experience at the broad-based village level in his first novel he focuses on its impact on the individual' (Schwerdt, 1995:80), and he goes further by arguing that the relationship between individual and the community is determined by the influence of colonialism in the character's life:

'Where traditional and the past are seen to play a significant role in the character's life the relationship between individual and the community is a close one. Where colonialism has loosened traditional ties, the character tends to be alienated from the traditional community' (ibid.)

As we read 'The River Between' we are surprised with the way how the community-based characters detach themselves from all that is pure and original from their tribes as they go through the influence of western cultural traditions. The sense of community is loosened and individualism thrusts upon them. At the outset of the novel waiyaki learns the ways of his tribe as he goes through different rituals and teachings and felt happy. He learns the myth of origin from his tribe at the sacred grove and tree with his father who ushers more in him a sense of closeness and belonging to his tribe:

'Waiyaki wanted to be happy. Was he not going to learn the ways of the land? Was he not going to drink the magic ritual of being born again?... you know Gikuyu and Mumbi? Father and Mother of the tribe? That is the seat of Murungu . He made Gikuyu and Mumbi...'

All a sudden Waiyaki's sense of community starts to diminish when goes to the Siriana Mission Centre. He learns from the white man that the young man should not worry themselves with politics; their concern should be on education as an end. At some time in point he asks himself if he was not alienating from all that he learned from his community and what his tribe expected from him, he remembered that the mission of learning the white man's magic was given by his father: the seer and leader of his tribe, this fact encouraged him most and kept him working on education for the youth. When Waiyaki realizes that he was off shoot from all that was pure and kept his tribe together it was too late, as his enemies

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Kaboni and Kamau have taken this to their advantage.

On his turn Joshua alienates himself from his community and disrupts his own families as he tries to impose his doctrines and traditions from the religious law he learnt from the white man. Killiam (1984: 155) on his critical analysis of James Ngugi's *The River Between* sustains that 'the religious law demands that man accept ideas and dogmas...even though they may have become strange or doubtful to him' which ends in family disruption and tragic ends. Muthoni feels that she has lost all that is from her Gikuyu community all that kept her tribe united: the initiation rites and she comes to a tragic end as she tries to reconcile both ways of life. Her death was interpreted in the light of the set of beliefs from each community: from those of Kameno it was interpreted as: 'a punishment to Joshua. It was also a punishment to the hills. It was a warning to all, to stick to the ways of the ridges, to the ancient wisdom of the land, to its ritual and songs' pp 62. While Joshua interpreted it as a punishment from God as she has taken wicked ways by going through circumcision. Nyambura who has bid to obey her father she also comes to a tragic end as she decides to Marry the man she loved most.

Final Considerations

The findings from the textual analysis unravel that Ngugi's *The River Between* projects a failed decolonization given to the alienation system that the African subject experiences when he tries to unite two different cultural realities. The fact that colonial formal education has been considered as an alternative in fighting against colonialism rather than an education based in African cultural principles sets as the motif for the failure of decolonization.

The alienated son either from Christian or traditional beliefs has a tragic end, which infuses the psychological effect of colonialism into African people's lives. Ngugi shows to some extent how the white man, aware of the African's might, have used African people to destroy their own people. By doing so he could set them apart empowering those who would disown their own cultural beliefs and customs.

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