

RESEARCH ARTICLE



INTERNATIONAL  
STANDARD  
SERIAL  
NUMBER  
INDIA

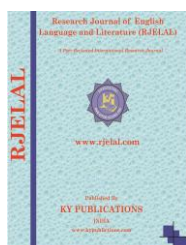
2395-2636 (Print); 2321-3108 (online)

## EFFECTS OF COLONIALISM AND WESTERN EDUCATION AND RESISTANCE TO COLONIALISM IN KENYA FROM THE PERSPECTIVE OF NGUGI WATHIONG'O'S NOVEL *THE RIVER BETWEEN*

S.NIVEDITHA<sup>1</sup>, V.SAKTHIVEL<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Assistant professor, Dept. of English, Madurai Sivakasi Nadars Pioneer Meenakshi Women's college, Poovanthi

<sup>2</sup>Assistant professor, Dept. of English, RDM Govt College, Sivagangai



### ABSTRACT

In African literature, the impact of colonialism has been predominant theme. African playwrights, novelists and poets have described, analysed the ill effects of colonialism in their writings. For instance, Chinua Achebe has portrayed the impact of colonialism in his novels, *No Longer at Ease*, *Things Fall Apart* and *Arrow of God*. Like Chinua Achebe, Ngugi wa Thiong'o deals with effects of colonialism in his novels namely, *Weep, not Child*, *The River Between*, *Matigari*, *The Grain of Wheat*, *Devil on the Cross* and *The Wizard of The Crow* and in his critical works and memoirs. This article attempts a discussion on the effects of colonialism, education and resistance to colonialism in Kenya with reference to Ngugi's second published novel, *The River Between*. The novelist has clearly shown how colonialism has created the rift among the people. The native has been separated as two factions one is embracing Christianity and another one is following the ideals of tradition. Christian missionary schools, churches and Christian hospitals have been used to make the native people to believe that their native culture is inferior one, where as British culture a superior one. Circumcision practice has been a unifying force among the native people. So, the Britishers undermine the practice as a barbaric one. Many people have been converted to Christianity. These converts have been forced to spread the message that undergoing the circumcision practice is a sin. Chege, father of Waiyaki strongly believes that his circumcised boy would bring peace and unity in the native soil. Chege strongly believes that his son would drive away the white settlers from the native soil by using western education as a resistance measure. (Keywords: colonialism, circumcision, conversion, Christianity and Education).

### Introduction

Ngugi wa Thiong'o, the tallest the East African novelist is known for his concern over his native people and their redemption from the white settlers. Ngugi has chronicled Kenya's modern history in his novels accurately. In most of his works, he has focused much on native people's revolt

against the British rule in the 1950's. His works mainly deal with the impact of colonialism and imperialism. The novel *The River Between*, has been remarkable for the description of Honia River, female circumcision, handling of water imagery, the conflict between Christianity and traditionalism, and the role of western education in Kenyan under

colonial clutches. This novel has portrayed how the native people have been forced to Christian conversion and to believe that their circumcision practice is an evil one. The novel also deals with how Chege and Waiyaki have decided to drive away the white settlers with the help of western education. Interestingly the novelist focuses much on the two themes namely the effects of colonialism and native people's resistance to colonial authority.

### Discussion

In Kenya, Ngugi wa Thiong'o is very much eager in the decolonization of Language. *Weep Not, Child* in 1964 was the first novel published in English by a writer from East Africa. His second novel, *The River Between* (1965) was also written in English. His third novel *A Grain of Wheat* is based on Fanonist Marxism, Ngugi wa Thiongo subsequently renounced English and Christianity and the name James Ngugi and he changed his name back to Ngugi wa Thiong'o and he started writing in Gikuyu or Kikuyu, a national language of Kenya. He wrote the first modern novel, *Devil on the Cross* (1982) in Gikuyu on toilet paper in prison. His work *Decolonising the Mind: The Politics of Language in African Literature* (1986) deals with his argument for African writers' using native language rather than European languages and renounce their tie with colonialism and to assert an authentic literature:

An African writer should write in a language that will allow him to communicate effectively with Peasants and workers in Africa. In other words, he should write in an African language. As for as publishing is concerned, I have no doubt that writing in an African language is as commercially viable as writing in any language. Market forces might even have added advantage of forcing those who express themselves in African languages to strive for local relevance in their writing because no peasant or worker is going to buy novels, plays or books that are totally irrelevant to his situation. Literature published in African Languages will have to be meaningful to the masses and therefore much closer to the realities of their situation. (153)

Ngugi begins his novel, *The River Between* with the beautiful description of the two ridges: the

description shows that how the natives had been peaceful till they encountered alien culture:

The two ridges lay side by side. One was Kameno, the other was Makuyu. Between them was the valley of life. Behind Kameno and Makuyu were so many more valleys and ridges, lying without any discernible plan. They were like many sleeping lions which never woke. They just slept, the big deep sleep of their creator

The two mountain ridges Kameno and Makuyu were peaceful until the white man arrived. Despite the warning from the old seer the people ignored it. Mugo wa Kibiro, a seer from Gikuyu predicted that, "There shall come a people with clothes like butterflies" (*River Between* 1, 2)

Kameno and Makuyu are the two Kikuyu communities. Before the arrival of the white settlers, the two communities were struggling for the leadership of the hills. At the arrival of the white masters, the conflict takes place whether to accept or to reject the ideals of the white men. Michael Rice has rightly said in his article "The River Between" about the antagonism between Kameno and Makuyu before and after the arrival of the white settlers in native land:

The incipient tensions, which up to the arrival of the white man have been contained and largely dissipated within the tribe, are dramatized in the two Gikuyu communities, Kameno and Makuyu, ancient rivals for the leadership for the country. Their latent antagonism is crystallized in their rejection or acceptance of the white man's ideas. Broadly speaking, Kameno rejects the new ways is conservative and strives to retain its traditional beliefs. Makuyu, on the other hand, embraces Christianity and establishes definite links with the white mission at Siriana. (12)

Waiyaki, a only son of Chege, is the hero of the novel. He has decided to bring the unity of the two factions. One is embracing white man's Christianity; another one is still following the ways of native god. The white man comes to settle to Siriana. Joshua and Kabonyi have been converted. Chege, father of Waiyaki remains loyal to his tradition. He is the head of every important

ceremony in the tribal community. He has the gift of magic. He is related to Mugo wa Kibro, a prophet. Though Chege has warned the people against the establishment of missionary center in Siriana. All ignored his warning. Chege demanded his son to save the people from the clutches of the white by learning the wisdom of the white settlers:

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 colonizers] with apanga [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 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. You go there .I tell you again, learn all the wisdom of the white man 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 (River Between 20, 21)

During 1950's, the colonialism created the conflict between Christianity and traditionalism. In other words, colonialism created the rift between the two tribal villages, Kameno and Makuyu. This conflict seems to be the threatening native people's bond to the land. Apollo O. Amoko highlights the rift between the two communities due to colonialism in his article entitled "The Resemblance of Colonial Mimicry: A Revisionary Reading of Ngugi wa Thiong'o's "TheRiver between":

The novel strives to depict colonialism as a disruption of the natural order of things, a disruption that serious rifts within the once united native community that the central oppositional actually dramatized in The River Between is within the Gikuyu polity rather than between the Gikuyu and their white colonizers. The text struggles to heal

rift between two Gikuyu communities? The Christian Makuyu and Kameno? As a precondition for the articulation of an effective anti- colonial nationalism. (36)

Ngugi clearly indicates the importance of land to the natives in the opening pages of the novel" These ancient hills and ridges were the heart and the soul of the land. They kept the tribes' magic and rituals, pure and intact". (The River Between 3). Colonialism created rift even in the Joshua family. Muthoni, the daughter of native Christian minister wants to be circumcised. So that, she can becomes the real woman of the hills. Her decision shocked her sister Nyambura and it is also against the principles of the church:

For a second Nyambura sat as if her thoughts, her feelings, her very being had been Paralysed. She could not speak. The announcement was too sudden and too stupefying. How could she believe what she had heard came from Muthoni's mouth? She looked at the river at the slightly swaying bulrushes lining the banks, and then beyond. Nothing moved on the huge cattle road that would through the forest towards Kameno. The yellowish streaks of morning light diffused through the forest, producing long shadows on the cattle path.(The River Between 28)

The first and foremost conflict between Christians and traditionalism is female circumcision. Christians feel that the practice is a barbaric one. Her decision would help her to maintain the connection to the land. Christine Loflin in her essay entitled, "Ngugi wa Thiong'o's Visions of Africa" commented that Muthoni's decision would connect her to the clan:

Yet Muthoni's description of her decision shows that she sees this action as the only way to have an authentic connection to the hills and the ridges. On the other hand, when Nyambura reaches out to the landscape to reassure herself and support her Christian beliefs, she receives nothing. Ngugi's description clearly shows that Christianity detaches the individual from the landscape, both through the loss of traditional initiation rites which would connect the individual to the clan and to the land, and through the loss of traditional interpretations of the landscape-for

Nyambura, the symbolic significance of the land in the Gikuyu culture has been lost. The land is silent. (80)

Muthoni tries to unite the alien religion and those of tribe. She sacrifices her own life after undergoing the circumcision ceremony. Charles E. Nnolim in his article entitled, "Background Setting: Key to the Structure of Ngugi's 'The River Between'" said that Muthoni's death creates an ironic situation:

Ironic situation arises from Muthoni's death after under- going the tribal ritual of circumcision: to Joshua it was "a warning to those who rebelled against their parents and the laws of God." But to Chege and the people from Kameno, "this was a punishment to Joshua ... a warning to all, to stick to the ways of the ridges, to the ancient wisdom of the land, to its ritual and song". (27)

Though white settlers have not penetrated to the hills. Their influence is strongly felt through the missionary school established in Siriana. Wayaikai clearly predicts the serious consequences of colonialism well in advance:

And still it rained, with the little streams gathering and Joining together. He saw what they were doing-Carrying away the soil. Corroding, eating away the earth. Stealing the land.

And that was the cry, the cry on every ridge. Perhaps the sleeping lions would sleep no more, for they were all crying for the soil. The earth was important to the tribe.(76)

Waiyaki went to Siriana. He was followed by Kamau and Kinuthia, his fellow herd boys. They learnt together under Livingstone in Siriana Missionary School. To the white, He would become a possible brave Christian leader of the church. Chege is the man from Kameno .He does not want to embrace Christianity .Chege went to tell their people of the white men. No one was ready to listen to him. Even when the white man came to Siriana, People would not listen to Chege's word. When Kabonyi and Joshua were converted, he broke off their relation. Chege is anxious over his son, Waiyaki:"Would he ever fail the tribe? Would he

ever fail the prophecy? At such times, he experienced a sensation of defeat of despair. (37)

Waiyaki is the last in the line of the seer who prophesies of a black messiah from the hills. According to Chege, when Waiyaki is circumcised, an initiation into manhood, he would absorb the Whiteman's wisdom more quickly. Waiyaki, Muthoni and Kamau were circumcised. Waiyaki was surprised over Muthoni's interest in circumcision. Muthoni did it in order to know the ways of the hills. Waiyaki wants to reconcile the people. He chooses the middle path:

Waiyaki did not want to be identified with either side; he was now committed to the 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. (*River Between*, 110)

Some of the countries in Europe established colonies in Asia, Middle east, African and so on. Colonialism is a political phenomenon. The colonizers made the colonized to believe that the alien culture is superior to their own by establishing schools, colleges and hospital by the introduction of their culture and language. The Britisher's educational goal was to expose Africans to a superior culture. Ngugi wa Thiongo states the impact of western education in his work, *Decolonising the Mind*:

The process annihilates people's belief in their names, in their languages, in their environment, in their capacities and ultimately in themselves. It makes them see their past as one wasteland of non achievement and it makes them want to distance themselves from the wasteland. It makes them want to identify with that which is furthest removed from themselves. (II)

Waiyaki introduced the song which was taught to him by a boy from the country beyond.This song clearly indicates that education is the right weapon to drive away the white master from the native soil:

Father, Mother  
Provide me with pen and slate  
I want to learn.

Land is gone  
Cattle and sheep are not there  
Not there any more  
What is left?  
Learning, learning  
Father, if you had many cattle and sheep  
I would ask for a spear and shield,  
But now-  
I do not want a spear  
I do not want a shield  
I want the shield and spear of learning. (*The River Between*, 90)

Both Waiyaki and Kabonyi wanted to resist the colonial authority in different ways. For the tribal people, Waiyaki is the real black messiah from the hills. He wanted to build more schools and fetch more teachers for his Marioshoni. Kabonyi wanted to fight against the white man in a different way. He talked of the hut tax imposed on the people by the government post. He had a doubt over the necessity of Whiteman's education and driving away the white man from the hills altogether is the real mission of Kabonyi. He becomes the leader of the people. He has formed the new Kiama. He would rid the country of the influence of the white man. He would restore the purity of the tribe and its wisdom.

Kabonyi asked his people to contemplate over the western education: "Or do you think education of our tribe, the education and wisdom which you all received, is in any below that of the white man (92)

Waiyaki pointed out the importance of learning, of acquiring all the wisdom that one could get. The narrator described the worth of education which he is going to impart in the ridges:

Waikaki's fame spread. The elders trusted him. They talked about him in their homes and in the fields. Even Kabonyi seemed resigned to this young man's leadership. It was faith, unknown, unquestioning, But he was their leader and they knew that he would never let them down. He was a match for the white man, these men who had wanted to annihilate Gikuyu and Mumbi. The tribe would coronaries, trawl conquer triumphing over the missionaries, traders, the governments and all those who had come to imitate the strangers. (*The River Between* 91)

Waiyaki is earnest in fulfilling the desire of his father, Chege. His Marishoni is the testimony:

Waiyaki wanted to unite the two factions through the western education. But Kabonyi burnt the houses of those who embraced Christianity. Waiyaki's mission of uniting the two factions through white man's education came to naught as he married Nyambura, the daughter of Joshua and breaking the oath of purity. The people believed that marrying a girl who is not circumcised is a sin and taking Muthoni to the missionary hospital is also a sin.

To Waiyaki, Learning the western education is the need of the hour to combat white man: and people rejected the prophecy of Mugo wa Kibiro, an ancient foreteller of the ridges:

But people rejected him and when the white man came, jealousy stood between Kamenno and Makuyu. You would not come together. And you left the white man alone. Now, instead of learning his ways and coming together so that united we may drive him out, Kabonyi and a few others cry for vengeance against Joshua and his followers. That is what I have come to tell you today. We are all children of Mumbi and we must fight together in one political movement, or else we perish and the white man will always be on our back, Can a house divide itself stand?(144-145)

Waiyaki feels that, Kabonyi and Others want to take revenge against Joshua and his followers. He has come to underline that they are all children of Mumbi and they must fight together in one movement, or else they would perish and the white man will always be on their back to waiyaki, the whiteman's education was an instrument of enlightenment and advance if only it could be used well. He still remembered his father's words, that longtime ago, when they stood on a hill, the whole country before them: "learn all the wisdom and all the secrets of the white man. But do not follow his vices" (116)

Cagri Tugrui Mart in his article," British Colonial Education Policy in Africa" comments on the westrn education in Africa:



Colonial powers used education as a tool for both political and economic reasons. Colonizing nations held the belief that "the superior" white race should educate and bring civilization to the "inferior" African people, but this notion was exploited by the colonizers. In order to achieve social control, the British Empire misused education. Colonial education was used to remove the colonized people from their indigenous learning. Colonizers wanted the African people to be useful and qualified personnel for their economic development. Moreover, for colonizers education was a means to win converts to their religion. (194)

In his article, Okplike Felix M.E, "Western Education and the Neglect of African Cultural Values in the Nigerian School System" comments on the negative impact of western education in Africa:

Apart from the economic resources in Africa for which reason they came, every other thing in Africa was uncivilized and unfit for consideration as part of school curriculum. No wonder then that western education was out to cleanse African culture values and practices. The result of their activities on the African soil had resulted in the total loss of the African pride, the submergence of the African language, the breakdown of moral and social discipline, the dethronement of communalism and the shift from honour to materialism. To say the least western education is an agent of cultural obliteration in Africa (31)

Britishers undermine the ancient ritual namely circumcision. Female and male circumcision has been done. It is an initiation ceremony into adulthood. In the beginning of the novel. Waiyaki is eagerly waiting for the ceremony: "This would mark his final initiation into manhood. Then he would prove his courage, his manly spirit" (*The River Between* 12)

Circumcision is a traditional one. It is an anti-colonial rite done to resist colonial domination. Nguagi compares Christianity and circumcision in the following passage of the novel: "For Nyambura had learnt and knew that circumcision was sinful. It was a pagan rite from which she and her sister had been saved. A daughter of God should never let

even a thought of circumcision come to her mind" (*The River Between*, 27).

Though Nyambura is the daughter of earnest Christian preacher. She wants to become a woman by doing the ceremony:

Father and mother are circumcised. Are they not Christians? Circumcision did not prevent them from being Christians. I too have embraced the white man's faith. However, I know it is beautiful, oh so beautiful to be initiated into womanhood.... Surely there is no tribe that does not circumcise. Or how does a girl grow into a woman?" (*The River Between*, 30)

Muthoni is bold enough to go for Circumcision. Her boldness is evident in the following passage: "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" (*The River Between*, 43-44)

Joshua was against the initiation rites, especially the female circumcision. To Joshua, this ceremony was the unforgettable sin. He asked Jesus Christ to pardon him for marrying a woman who had circumcised: "God, you know it was not my fault. God, I could not do otherwise, and she did this while she was in Egypt." (30)

Joshua asked the Almighty to stop the evils of his natives:

O, God, look at their preparations,

O, God, Why don't you descend on this wicked generation?

And finish their evil ways? Circumcision is coming.

Fight by me, Oh Lord. (31).

Chege strongly believes that his son a circumcised boy would help the tribe:

And so Chege waited and hoped. He watched Waiyaki, his progress and his behavior. He lived in the sun. If the prophecy had not been fulfilled in him, well, there was the son. What was the difference? A savior shall come from the hills. Good. Waiyaki was the last in the line of that great seer who had prophesied of a black messiah from the hills. The boy was doing well at Siriana. He had early gone

through the second birth. And this season he would be initiated into manhood. This would help him to absorb the whiteman's wisdom more quickly and help the tribe. And this was what he wanted; to see Waiyaki become a Man before he himself died; then he could be sure that the work he had begun-no, the work begun a long time ago by Mugo would not perish. You could more readily trust a man a kihii, an uncircumcised boy. (37,38).

Circumcision practice has been a unifying force .The Christian missionary school has denied permission to the boys who were circumcised or circumcised boys had been sent out. The narrator stated the importance of circumcision in the novel: "Circumcision was an important ritual to the tribe .It kept people together, bound the tribe. It was at the core of the social structure, and something that gave meaning to a man's life. End the custom and the spiritual basis o and of the tribe's cohesion and integration would be no more" (*The River Between*, 66)

### Conclusion

Ngugi wa Thiong'o has highlighted the effects of colonialism like that of Chinua Achebe. First and foremost impact of colonialism is that it created rift among the native people and in the family. The two factions are: the one is embracing Christianity and another one is followers of traditionalism. Kabonyi and Waiyaki wanted to resist the colonial authority in their own ways. Waiyaki wanted to use the western education as a weapon to drive away the natives from the native soil where as Kaboni feels that western education is in no way help them to send out the Britishers from Kenya. Circumcision is an ancient ritual, it would help one to bring unity among the native people where as the Britishers make the people to believe that circumcision ceremony is an evil one. It is evident when Josuha prays to the Christian God that he should descent on the earth to save the people from the evil practice, circumcision ritual.

### Works Cited

Okpilike,F.E.M. , "Western Education and the Neglect of African Cultural Values in the Nigerian School System",*Journal of Education and Practice*, vol 3,No 14 ,2012.

Cagri Tugru Mart,"British Colonial Education Policy in Africa", *International Journal of English and Literature*.Vol.2(9),Dec,2011.

Ngugi,James.*The River Between*.London:Heinemann.

Thiong'o, Ngugi wa. *Decolonising the Mind. The Politics of Language in African Literature*. London: James Curry, 1986.

Loflin,Christine."Ngugi wa Thiong'o's Visions of Africa."*Research in African Literature* 26, no.4( winter 1995):76-93.

Nnolim, Charles E. "BACKGROUND SETTING: KEY TO THE STRUCTURE OF NGUGI'S 'THE RIVER BETWEEN.'" *Obsidian (1975-1982)*, vol. 2, no. 2, 1976, pp. 20-29. *JSTOR*, JSTOR, [www.jstor.org/stable/44490206](http://www.jstor.org/stable/44490206).

Rice, Michael. "The River between: A Discussion." *English in Africa*, vol. 2, no. 2, 1975, pp. 10-21. *JSTOR*, JSTOR, [www.jstor.org/stable/40238336](http://www.jstor.org/stable/40238336).