

RESEARCH ARTICLE

Exploring the themes of Individual and the Nation in Ngugi Wa Thiong'o's "*The River Between*"

AshishAwasthi

ResearchScholar,

Department of English, C.M.P. Degree College

University of Allahabad.

Abstract

Ngugi Wa Thiong'o succeeds in writing the key elements of conflict and struggles of African people in his major works. *The River Between* addresses the relevant political and historical issues of colonized Africa. This novel is related to the theme of exploitation of local Kenyans by Whites and its consequences in Kenya. The early phase of postcolonial literature has often been associated with nationalism and focuses on the ideology of pre-independence. This paper tends to unearth the dissimilarities between the oppressed and oppressor in the *The River Between*. The novel has been set in pre-independent Kenya where a certain degree of idealism and romanticism has been portrayed but there is also a fundamental sense of despair. The main focus of Ngugi in *The River Between* is to depict the cultural conflict and mythology of Gikuyu community and therefore, the theme of individual and nation becomes very relevant in this novel.

Keywords: colonization, consciousness, individual, nation, religion.

Discussion

The writings, particularly in the early stages of postcolonial literature, bear the mark of political advancement in the colonies. Local writers often addressed the pressing historical and political issues of the time. Literature of colonial countries has brought implications of relationship of colonizer and colonized and therefore continually associated with the public discourse. In the time of pre-independence, the literature became a significant tool of political counteraction and focused on the unified communities and cultural themes which were intended to raise the national consciousness of Kenyan people. This paper intends to scrutinize the early writings of Ngugi Wa Thiong'o in which the nationalist movement against colonialism has been focused with the context of his second published novel *The River Between*.

RESEARCH ARTICLE

With the concern of African literature from early 1950s onwards the African writers were dedicated to write about struggle of common and political issues of colonized African. Many intellectuals considered these writings to be the ethical responsibility of African writers. As Chinua Achebe rightly mentioned –

“[...] an African creative writer who tries to avoid the big social and political issues of contemporary Africa will end up being completely irrelevant – like that absurd man in the proverb who leaves his burning house to pursue a rat fleeing from the flames.” (Achebe, 1968)

The writers of Africa have written the about the pre-independence time and used it as “a weapon of political liberation” for the people of Africa (Bohmer, 2005, p.175). It has been regarded by African writers that literature must be the ideal tool of the “moving spirit in the nationalist struggle” (ibid) and literature should also provide a social modification which was necessary to bring a social reformation among the people of Africa.

Like the other writers of African continent Ngugi considers his writing as a national consciousness which was the only medium through which the national consciousness could be awoken in the African people. Thus, the national identity has been recognized as a “historical

construct, constituted in particularly by the [...] narratives which particular communities tell themselves about who and what they are.” (William, 1999, p.18) In the early writings of Ngugi the conventional and communal ideology has been reestablished and British ideology has been overruled. In this attempt of recreating the image of African culture, tradition and national identity the literary figures were known as “beacons, soothsayers and seers of political movements” and so it was “the writer’s role to reinterpret the world to grasp the initiative in cultural self-definition” (Bohmer, 2005, p.176).

Ngugi WaThiong’o primarily known as a socially activist writer who redefined the generation of Kenya. He clearly remarked the relation between literature and politics in his book of essays *Writers in Politics*: “A writer’s subject matter is history: i.e., the process of man acting on nature and changing himself. The entire changing relations of production are a whole territory of a writer’s literary concern. Politics is hence part and parcel of this literary territory.” (Thiong’o, 1981, p.72) So Ngugi’s literature is not only a tool which remarks the truth of society but is an innovative procedure that is adapted by the historical and social tenets and ideologies; “It cannot elect to stand above or transcend economic, politics, class, race or what Achebe calls ‘the burning issues of the day’ because those very burning issues

RESEARCH ARTICLE

with which it deals take place within an economic, political class and race context.” (Ibid, p.6).

In the early writings of Ngugi there is an echo of Chinua Achebe’s *Things Fall Apart* (1958). In *The River Between* the disruptive practices of colonizers has been depicted. The novel discloses the early impact of colonization and the slow transformation in the society and community of Kenya. The novel opens up with an accomplished use of imagery of the landscape and natural beauty of rural Kenya:

“The two ridges lay side by side. One was Kamino, the other was Makuyu. Between them was a valley. It was called the valley of life. Behind the Kamino and Makuyu were 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.” (Ngugi,2015, p. 1)

The opening paragraph of the novel explicitly narrates about the serenity and peace of the valley till the advent of Britishers. In the novel Ngugi traces a detailed account of all the political upheavals of Kenya with the significance of important historical events and historical figures. Ngugi’s novels bring the important sections of the narratives and so it’s not

doable to read *The River Between* against the backdrop of political and social reformations in Kenya.

Even Ngugi problematizes the notion of historical interpretation “by blurring boundaries between national and individual events, between factual history and fiction, thus throwing into question the process by which subjects position themselves in history and the ways they might conceive and tell the story.” (Klesser, 1999, p.76). Through his novels Ngugi also rewrites the history of Kenya which has been mis-presented by colonial writers and believed to have deprived of their own voice: “Ngugi posits narrative here as an agent of history because it provides the space for challenging our nations of national identities, uses of history, and ways in which they are deployed in power contestation in modern Kenya in Africa and general.” (James,1999, p.2)

Distinctly, Ngugi’s novels manifested the consciousness of being individual and nationality through the historic representation of African continent, particularly Kenya. While the colonizers attempted to disintegrate the communities of Kenya and tried to create tension among the African communities by introducing Christianity, Ngugi through his novels tried to re established the unity by reviving the roots of the history of Kenya. In the novel *The River Between* Ngugi uses the

RESEARCH ARTICLE

communal history through the depiction of powerful mythical characters which had greatly influenced in the Gikuyu religion and tradition. Through these characters Ngugi wanted to glorify the past of Kenya and warn their people that colonizers are detrimental to ethnicity and tradition of Kenya: ““There shall come a people with clothes like butterflies”. These were the white men.” Further Ngugi stressed over the power of mythical characters like, “...Wachiori, a great warrior, who had led the whole tribe against Ubaki, Masai. As a young man he had killed a lion, by himself. When he died, at the hands of a straying white man, he left a great man, he left a great name, the idol of, many a young warrior.” (Ibid, p.2-3).

Although the indication of the noble past and great tribal individualities counter the colonial regime and tries to abolish the colonial intention of disintegration and simultaneously the shared the historical aspect of all the tribes works as a origin of harmony and coequality between them. As Waiyaki the central figure of *The River Between* points out: “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 in their traditions going back to the past, the very beginning, Gikuyu and Mumbi.” (Ibid, p.137).

In the African countries there are so many communities who practice different religions, traditions and ethnicities but one thing that kept them tied together was the glorification of past and tribal myths and Ngugi “seeks to found a sense of self in a recovery of history, a recuperation of tradition.” (James, 1999, p.46) With the struggles of colonizer’s religion and culture these references of the joint heritage and history contributed to the solidarity of the African nationalism and made a sense of rootedness and indigenous action.

When colonizers couldn’t succeed to convert the religion and cultural aspect of the local Kenyan, they started alluring them by good education and frightening them by the power of Jesus and Christianity. In doing so people like Joshua converted their religion into Christianity: “He (Joshua), along with a few others, had been the first to be converted to the new faith... Issiah, the white man’s seer had prophesied of Jesus. He had told of the coming of a messiah.”

(Ngugi, 2015, p.28).In *The River Between* Ngugi through characters like Chege stressed on the importance of Nation and Chege warned his people and his son Waiyaki about the disastrous intentions of colonizers. Chege clearly told his son about the salvation: “Salvation shall come from the hills. From the blood that flows in me, I say from the same tree, a son shall rise. And

RESEARCH ARTICLE

his duty shall be to lead and save the people!" (Ibid p.20). Chege was a prudent man who knew that to defeat the White man they must learn their wisdom and manners, and he instructed Waiyaki about this: "Arise. Heed the prophecy. Go to the mission place. Learn all the wisdoms and all the secrets of the White man. But do not follow his vices. Be true to your people and the ancient rites." (Ibid)

Ngugi wanted his people to be educated and throughout the novel *The River Between* he tried to give a message to his native countrymen about the importance of education: "Children knew him and hailed him as "our teacher" ... Waiyaki himself was much more interested in teaching and handling the children than in the organization and of management of the Kiama." (Ibid, p.88). Waiyaki has been portrayed as a messiah of African people for whom the education of colonizers was not important for native Africans. He always believed that education is the only medium through which colonization can be abolished in Africa. He believed that education of African norms and culture is not inferior to missionary education: "...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?" (Ibid, p.92). Despite his efforts to establish the cultural education and bridge between two tribeshe was unsuccessful as colonial powers had already

contaminated the minds of some native leaders.

In the novels of Ngugi his characters are enforced to be the savior of their country due to their personal circumstances. The personal stories of central characters unfold the real calamities of African and Kenyan people. According to Ngugi: "In the African way, the community serves the individual. And the individual finds the fullest development of his personality when he is working in and for community as a whole." (Thiong'o quoted in James, 1919, p.15).

In *The River Between*, Waiyaki is the savior of the African community and he was given attributed with the responsibility to save his people from any catastrophe by his father Chege: "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, 2015, p.21).

Waiyaki is a real patriotic who knows that both Kameno and Makuyu ridges has to come together to fight the colonizer. "Another thing was coming to his mind. Every day he was becoming convinced of the need for unity between Kameno and Makuyu. The ancient rivalry would cripple his efforts in education." (Ibid, p.89).

RESEARCH ARTICLE

When Waiyaki's father Chege consecrated him that he had to play a major role in the emancipation of the native Kenyan, his character became very predictable as he took the responsibility. He became a heroic character who was willing to do anything for the welfare of his countrymen: "The myth helps Ngugi in articulating his theme of public responsibility which is seen as an educated man's burden that Waiyaki must take on." (Ogude, 1999, p.69). and that is why, "Waiyaki has very little personal agency outside that cut out for him in nationalist rhetoric." (ibid).

In the novel *The River Between* the depiction of characters becomes much more complicated as Ngugi tries to solve the stretch between individual and collective consciousness. In this novel, "people get inserted into historic moments in society which exact certain demands on them as part of the collective or national experience, but they also have specific histories as individuals which have a bearing on how they respond to the demands of history." (Ogude, 1999, p.73).

The individuality of women has been portrayed in a revolutionary way in *The River Between*. Muthoni, the daughter of Joshua who is a preacher of Christianity is a very significant character. She wanted to be circumcised despite knowing that her

father won't allow her to do so and circumcision is a sin in Christianity. She shared this with her sister Nyambura: "Nyambura, I want to circumcise." (Ngugi, 2015, p.24). For Muthoni the circumcision would make her a complete woman: "Look, please, I – I want to be a woman. I want to be a real girl, a real woman, knowing all the ways of the hills and ridges." (Ibid, p.25).

Conclusion

Finally, it could be said that the early fictional writings of Ngugi WaThiong'o work as a medium of discourse of social and political society. The political aspects of the novels also deal with the eternal propaganda of African people. The novels of Ngugi are entangled with the history of Africa, as quoted by Thiong'o himself, "In the very process of articulating a people's collective consciousness, the writer is led into political struggles." (Thiong'o, 1981, p.73). *The River Between* is the first written and second published novel of Ngugi WaThiong'o. This novel vindicates that literature should be seen as a reflection of history because it points out all the complexities of the history and tradition of Kenya. The narrative of the novel provides, "space within which an historical meaning can be contested" and so literature becomes a significant medium for, "ordering and shaping history." (Ogude, 1999, p.153). And therefore, "The African writer then positions himself as part of the history-

RESEARCH ARTICLE

making process that tries to redefine the historical account of the continent and find one's place within it". (Ogude, 1999, p.155).

Through the characters like Waiyaki, Muthoni and Chege, Ngugi dexterously delineated the themes of individual and all these characters stand for the welfare of nation, culture, religion and tradition. Waiyaki has been portrayed as a savior of the African people and he goes through his character adequately. In this paper the significance of nation and individual has been explored.

References

- Achebe, Chinua. 1968. *The Duty and Involvement of The African Writer*
Available at:
<http://www.blackpast.org/1968-chinua-achebe-duty-and-involvement-african-writer>.
- Boehmer, Elleke. 2005. *Colonial and Postcolonial Literature. Migrant Metaphors*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Kessler, Kathy. 1994. *Rewriting History in Fiction: Elements of Postmodernism in Ngugi WaThiong'o's Later Novels*. In: Ariel. A review of International English Literature. 1994, 25:2, pp. 75-90
- Ogude, James. 1999. *Ngugi's Novels and African History. Narrating the Nation*. London:Pluto Press.

Williams, Patrick. 1999. *Ngugi WaThiong'o. Contemporary World Writers*. Manchester: Manchester University Press.

Thiong'o Ngugi Wa. 1981. *Writers in Politics*. London. Heinemann.

Thiong'o Ngugi Wa. 2015. *The River Between*. New York. Penguin Books.