



Deconstruction of Literary History in Margaret Ogola's *The River and The Source*

June Chebet Chelule 

Department of Literature,
University of Nairobi

Email: chebetjune5@gmail.com

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Abstract

This essay sought to have a dialogue on the role of Margaret Ogola's renowned work *The River and the Source* in retelling the country's history spanning from precolonial times to independent Kenya through the lives of her female protagonists and their loved ones. The novel is semi-autobiographical because the author was inspired by her mother who told her about the lives of her grandmother and great grandmother. The study has dug deeper into Ogola's contribution to literary history by engaging with her novel guided by deconstruction and new historicism literary theories. This study discusses how her work borrows from history, expounds on it and fills in the gaps in selective history while giving meaning into her narrations from a reader's perspective. The specific objectives of the study were to celebrate the author's life and contribution to literature in Kenya and to demonstrate how the novel creates value in the reader. The novel won the 1995 commonwealth Writers' Prize for best first book, Africa Region.

Keywords: deconstruction, icon, literary history, new historicism



Public Interest Statement

The River and the Source was studied as a text book in Kenya twice and examined in Kenya Certificate of Secondary Education (KCSE) exam between the years 1999 to 2002 and between the years 2012 to 2016. It has been widely debated on but the researcher has identified the gaps in the interpretations. *The River and the Source* is often read as a feminist novel. This has led to a kind of dismissal of it as a parochial attempt to ‘kill’ male characters and portray them as weak. This study seeks to disparage this approach and prove the trigger behind the narration which a reminder of value and wisdom in it.

Introduction

Margaret Ogola is one of the icons of Kenyan literature. She was born on 12th June 1958 in Asembo, Siaya County Kenya. She attended Thompson’s Falls High School for her Ordinary Levels (O-levels) and proceeded to Alliance Girls High School for her Advanced level (A-Levels). She graduated from the University of Nairobi in 1984 with Bachelor of Medicine and Surgery and in 1990 with Master of Medicine in Pediatrics. She died on 21st September 2011 aged 53. She is the author of the novels *The River and the Source* (1994), *I Swear by Apollo* (2002), *Place of Destiny* (2005) and *Mandate of the People* published posthumously in 2012. She also co-authored a biography. Margaret Ogola’s *The River and the Source* retells the country’s history spanning from precolonial times to the new republic through the lives of her female protagonists Akoko, Nyabera, Awiti, Wandia and their loved ones. The novel is divided into four parts named: The Girl Child; The Art of Giving; Love and Life and Variable Winds. Raman Selden, Peter Brooker and Peter Widdowson in *A Reader's Guide to Contemporary Literary Theory* discuss deconstruction as advanced by Jacques Derrida. It aims to disturb in order to discover. By deconstructing a text, you learn to read beyond its straightforward content and uncover new meanings and truths. Roland Barthes argues in ‘Death of the Author’ (Birth of the Reader) that a text comes to life through the reader. The writer should write in a state in which they are unaware of what they are communicating. Theory should not be imposed on texts since it kills creativity. The author does not intentionally set out to tell a story rigid to a particular theory but the work opens up to theory as she recounts the events from either fiction or memory. The discussion is approached from three trajectories titled:

- Pre-colonial reflections
- Colonialism and new order
- Newly independent nation realities

Pre-colonial Reflections

Margaret Ogolla presents a well-established culture (*chik*) that existed before colonisation with a strong sense of communal values of *dak* and *wat* which stand for neighbourliness and brotherhood respectively. There are naming, marriage, and burial rites discussed in the life of her protagonist Akoko. She discusses the rumours of the white men (*jorochere*) before their impact in this part of the country. Her description of the impact of the changes on the Luo community is almost identical to other national regions' depictions. The Gikuyu in central had a seer Mugo wa Kibiro and the Kipsigis had Mugeni. They are both said to have prophesied that there shall come a people with 'clothes like butterflies' and a 'line emitting fire' in reference to the railway. Therefore, her community can be regarded as a microcosm of the larger country. The first and second part of the novel dwells on the life and times of Akoko. It opens around 1870 with the description of the birth of a girl child who is the first daughter of Chief Odero Gogni of Yimbo. Her mother Aketch is his second wife. Polygamy is a part of the culture of the Luo community during this time and it is not objected. The chief expects that the new born will be a boy when he hears its first cry. He already has seven sons and he seem to treasure boys since the author uses the expression "another rock for my sling" to capture his thoughts. He is proven wrong and girl grows up to be her father's favourite.

Ogolla describes how children were given names in the community. The child is named Adoyo because she is born at a time of plenty. Children are named after seasons. She is also named Obanda which is a man's name because the parents dream of a great uncle who was a medicine man. In this culture, an ancestor sends a dream to stake interest in a child. Her third name Akelo is given after a bout of colic in which she cries all night. Akelo as her grandmother's sister who died childless. The sister had brought her to live with her as a co-wife. This is done to appease her spirit. This is evidence that the people believe in life after death; spirits and ancestors are seen to have power to control the lives of the living. The child stopped crying after the grandmother gave her this name. Lastly the girl acquired the name Akoko because of her character. It means the noisy one. She was a feisty girl with a bubbly character. Her first words were *dwaro mara* translated want mine. This demonstrates that she was not one to be denied and she was ready to fight for her place in the society. She was fast in growth and intelligence.

Ogolla takes us through the marriage rites of the time. Akoko has had twelve suitors on her nineteenth birthday but her father always turns them away. She is almost convinced that God in all his bountifulness did not create a man good enough for her. She gets lucky on her thirteenth suitor Owuor Kembo son of Chief Kembo and Nyar Sembo. Women are named after the place they were born in once they arrive at their matrimonial homes. *Nyar* is daughter of and *Sembo* is her home. The colourful marriage negotiations

and dowry payment is captured in the novel leaving one fascinated by them. After a conflict with her in laws, Akoko goes back home and Owuor has to pay a fine to have her back. They had claimed that she has bewitched the chief because he refuses to remarry yet Akoko is slow in conceiving. Akoko does not take it lightly.

Owuor Kembo loves Akoko who is hardworking and they are blessed with three children Obura Kembo heir apparent, Nyabera and Owang Sino. At this time the traditional setting is still dominant and their lack of awareness of the outside world is shattered when they learn about the existence of *pesa* (money) and the building of the railway that takes their son Obura to his death in the First World War. Ogolla is humorous in her description of the reaction of the children when they first see the people who have been sent to confirm Obura's death. This is in 1918 at the end of the war. Ogolla gives a premonition that 'tragedy is like a habitual drunk who keeps coming back for more'.

Burial rites are revealed when Chief Owuor Kembo dies. Akoko is 47 years old and she sings dirges as she mourns him. Mock fights are carried out in honour of the dead. There are 60 days of mourning and the bride of Owang Sino arrives. She gave birth to a son even though she disappointed Akoko in her laziness. Tragedy strikes again and Owang Sino gets choked by a fish bone and dies leaving a vacuum in the chief's position since a toddler cannot rule. Nyabera got married at eighteen and she joins her mother in mourning her brother. Otieno Kembo takes over the chieftdom and becomes arrogant. He misused his late brother's property when he is made chief in custody of the little boy Owuor.

The second part introduces the life of Nyabera at a time when her daughter is born. A ceremony is done to confuse the evil spirits that have been causing her to lose her children and her daughter is named Awiti which means the one who had been thrown away. The child's father Okumu dies when the child is four years and Nyabera is inherited by a family member of the deceased. The practice is known as *tero* and is meant to provide protection for the widow and to ensure continuity of the man's family. She gets two children who both die and she is unhappy in her status as an inherited woman.

Ogolla demonstrates that the Luo had a rich folklore with well-established social and political structures in place. The people worshipped *Were*, had chiefs and a council of elders known as *jodongo*, had rites for each stage of life and policies for conflict resolution. Transition is witnessed with the coming of the white man and with it comes some confusion.

Colonialism and new order

Akoko hears about the colonial government and goes to seek their intervention when the excesses of Otieno get out of hand. It is in Kisumu and is a long journey by foot. This sets

her up as a pioneer since the outside world is not yet familiar to the residents of the sleepy village. Homi Bhabha in 'The Location of Culture' argues that colonialism produced an entity characterized by colonial ambivalence and hybridity towards culture. The colonised finds themselves in between being native and being Westernised. This is observed in a number of characters who practice both African and Western culture. Hybridity and mimicry are revealed in the comical figures the villagers portray and in the clerk at the court with pens inside his hair. Akoko and her entourage are dressed in skins and are awed by modernity in Kisumu. Her brother in law Otieno is made to return all her property and at the age of fifty Akoko is a *migogo*. She leaves the clan of her husband with a mighty herd that moves in three cohorts and goes to the household of Oloo her brother. At this time, she has one surviving daughter, one granddaughter and one grandson. She has lost her husband and two sons.

With each generation comes changes as is seen when Nyabera seeks a new life and is baptized Maria revealing the impact of religion on their lives. She moves with Akoko, her daughter and her nephew son of Owang Sino who later opts to become a priest. The Christian religion has replaced the worship of Were. Her daughter Elizabeth Awiti gets basic education and becomes a teacher. She gets married to Mark Sigu who fought in the Second World War. Akoko dies in her sleep a happy woman just when Awiti is about to get married. Elizabeth is portrayed as a principled person because she ignores all other suitors until Mark Sigu courts her. Her marriage negotiations are different from the time of her grandmother since the couple are no longer matched by their parents. However, Akoko presides over the meeting of the two families and the symbolic payment of dowry. The two newlyweds begin life with problems from alcohol and interference from Mark's mother. This is a signal that the fabric in the society is disintegrating because of new culture. They later migrate to Nakuru and have some sense of stability. The period of emergency and independence is captured during the time that the children of Elizabeth and Mark are born. Ogola personalizes this period through her characters as their marriage is affected by the distance when Elizabeth has to go back to the village because of the volatile pre independence years.

This is a period of social, political and religious transition. Western culture is threatening the former order and Christianity is replacing traditional religion. Customs like *nak* initiation by removal of six lower teeth are discarded. There are positive and negative repercussions that come with each change.

Newly Independent Nation Realities

The final two parts of the narration dwell on the life of Awiti and her family of seven children. It spans from the period of emergency, to independence and after independence.

This is a period of heightened political activity in Kenya. From October 1952 to December 1959, Kenya was put under a state of emergency because of the MAU MAU rebellion against British colonial rule. Thousands of Kenyans were incarcerated in detention camps. By 1956, the death toll stood at more than 13,500 Africans (guerrillas, civilians and troops) and about 100 Europeans. These events had an impact on the family and in the disruption of life for all Kenyans. The author reveals that the Kikuyu especially had it rough.

The setting is a modern one with new careers and technological advancement. Mark Sigu, her husband, is promoted to managerial level and she is a teacher. Becky and Vera are the first set of twins the couple are blessed with. Their character is juxtaposed and it is evident that the author alludes Vera as modern time Akoko or a reincarnate in her spirit. Aoro is the second born followed by Tony then another set of twins Opiyo and Odongo. The last born is Mary. Maria Nyabera dies in 1975 in the presence of her daughter.

Vera is brilliant in school and goes to the university to pursue a degree in electrical engineering. She joins the non-marrying *opus dei* section. Becky is beautiful and runs away from home to become an air hostess. She gets married to Johnny a white man but they later separate. They have a boy named Johnny and a girl Alicia. Becky has many sexual partners who provide her with luxury and property but she gets infected with Hiv/Aids and dies. The author is pointing out that with choices come consequences. Her disobedience and irresponsibility lead to immature death. It is also the new culture that is causing the chaos. Children are born out of wedlock and divorce is now happening unlike in the past.

Aoro who becomes a doctor meets Wandia from Central Kenya at the university. They get married and she becomes very close to Elizabeth her mother-in-law. She is an example of a modern woman who proposes marriage. She is later awarded a doctorate in medicine and becomes the chairperson of the department of pathology at the University of Nairobi. Intermarriage is now accepted unlike in the past. Wandia and Aoro are the new face of the nation because they intermarry and they are both highly educated professionals. They have three children; twins Daniel and Lisa, and Mugo. They adopt Alicia and Johnny. The novel ends when Elizabeth dies at the age of 70. She is a happy woman, fulfilled and satisfied to have continued the river which begun with Akoko her grandmother.

Conclusion

This essay has demonstrated the richness of the novel *The River and the Source* in placing Kenya's history into the literary space. The author also preserves the folklore of the Luo community and instils in the reader a sense of the virtues that the people held dear. This

will motivate them to retain the good cultural aspects from the past. Margaret Ogola inculcates values in the reader when she provides role models such as Owuor Kembo contrasted with his lazy brother Otieno and Vera who is juxtaposed with her twin sister Becky. These characters are important in shaping the behavior of the readers as they will learn desirable behavior and avoid negative traits. Finally, the writer has celebrated the role of women in the society and shown that the chief was right when he concluded that “a home without daughters is like a river without a source”. Literature is a reflection of society and there have been great men and women who should be emulated. It is therefore important to accept and to acknowledge them. It should not be misconstrued that by creating strong female characters a writer aims to degrade the male since there are as many strong women as there are men and both are valuable in the society. *The River and the Source* has integrated several Luo words and expressions to reveal the setting and to add authenticity to the story. Oral narratives such as the myth of Ramogi, songs, similes and proverbs have all been craftily woven into the narration making it a striking novel. The title is also relevant and symbolic. All these traits have made the work to be a masterpiece and a potential classical text.

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Biography

The writer is an MA (Literature) University of Nairobi holder, and a teacher of English and Literature with an initial background qualification of Bachelors of Education (Arts) degree. She has a special interest in literature and linguistics.