



Gender perspectives and portrayal in Ngugi wa Thiong'o's *The River Between* (1965)



Book Review



Published in Nairobi, Kenya by Royallite Global in the *Hybrid Journal of Literary and Cultural Studies*, Volume 3, Issue 4, 2021

© 2021 The Author(s). This article is distributed under a Creative Commons Attribution (CC-BY-NC-SA) license.

Article Information

Submitted: 15th August 2021

Accepted: 28th November 2021

Published: 30th December 2021

Additional information is available at the end of the article



<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>

ISSN 2707-2150 (Online)

ISSN 2707-2169 (Print)

To read the paper online, please scan this QR code



Faustina Nankuri¹, Beauty Patience Addo², Michael Akomea³, Isaac Anobi Asare⁴ & Alberta Aseye Ama Duhoe⁵

¹Department of Languages, St. Joseph's College of Education, Ghana

^{2,4}Department of Ghanaian Languages, Mount Mary College of Education, Ghana

³Department of English, McCoy College of Education, Ghana

⁵Department of Languages, St. Francis College of Education, Ghana

Correspondence: tinanankuri@gmail.com

<https://orcid.org/0000-0003-0897-534X>

Abstract

This study sought to investigate the feminist viewpoint in Ngugi Wa Thiong'o's *The River Between*. The novel explores the character of women and further discusses Kenya's geographical history as well as the influence of British colonization through Muthoni. It also examines the novel's feminist elements, since the female characters are victims of African society's patriarchal system. Ngugi portrays women in the novel from various dimensions thus a woman may be a mother, politician, socialist, educator, and family provider all at the same time. Ngugi depicts British colonization as the cause of the Kikuyu-Kenyan society's demise. The majority of his heroes are female and play important roles in the fight against tyranny and exploitation. To liberate themselves, they endeavor to shatter patriarchal obstacles and bring about reforms in their culture. Ngugi depicts the essence of a woman and illuminates the positive and bad characteristics of women in Kenyan culture. In the novel, Ngugi does not disregard the influence of colonialism on society in general and women in particular. Muthoni puts to light the predicament of women and the impoverished. *The River Between* therefore addresses the exploitation of African women based on race, class, and gender.

Keywords: African society, British colonialism, Gikuyu, Kenya, liberation, women

How to Cite:

Nankuri, F., Addo, B. P., Akomea, M., Asare, I. A., & Duhoe, A. A. A. (2022). Gender perspectives and portrayal in Ngugi wa Thiong'o's *The River Between* (1965). *Hybrid Journal of Literary and Cultural Studies*, 3(4). Retrieved from <https://royalliteglobal.com/hybrid-literary/article/view/741>



Public Interest Statement

This study explores the role of pre-capitalist Gikuyu women and how these roles changed with colonization, among other factors. The ideology of Gada, based on gender and age, regulated powers and relationships between men and women. It demonstrates that while the status of Gikuyu women was not completely equal to that of men, the incorporation of the Gikuyu into the colonial state bolstered the elements of pre-existing inequality.

1.0 Introduction

Ngugi wa Thiong'o is a Kenyan writer of Gikuyu descent, Ngugi is the author of various novels such as *Weep Not Child* (1964), *The River Between* (1965), *A Grain of Wheat* (1967) and *Petals of Blood* (1977). In 1980 Ngugi published the first modern novel ever written in Gikuyu called *Devil on the Cross*. Ngugi's critical works include *Homecoming* (1972), *Detained: A Writer's Prison Diary* (1981), *Decolonizing the Mind* (1986) and *Moving the Center* (1993). As a novelist, playwright and critical thinker Ngugi has dealt with the concerns most affecting his native Kenya including issues of Colonialism, Nationalism and Post-Colonialism. During the late 70's his commitment to art and community led him to form communal theater groups in villages, which showcased some of his most indicting plays. These works portrayed the political corruption of PostColonial life in Kenya and the people's struggle to define an identity despite years of harsh political and social transitions. In 1977 Ngugi was arrested for his involvement with the communal theaters. While in prison, Ngugi reflected on the urgency in forming a truly African literature and at the same time wrote *Devil on the Cross* on prison issued toilet paper. He subsequently would abandon English for his native Gikuyu for all his future novels. After being released from prison, Ngugi lost a university position and his family suffered from constant harassment. In 1982, Ngugi left Kenya and has been in exile ever since. Ngugi Wa Thiong'o is the recipient of numerous awards including the Paul Robeson Award for Artistic Excellence, Political

Conscience and Integrity (1992); Gwendolyn Brooks Center Contributors Award for Significant Contribution to the Black Literary Arts (1994); Fonlon Nichols Prize (1996); and the Distinguished Africanist Award by the New York African Studies Association (1996).

2.0 Literature review

2.1 *Theoretical framework*

Feminism is a political movement that seeks to end patriarchy and misogyny. Moi (1985) reports de Beauvoir as saying that throughout history, women have been reduced to objects for males: "woman" has been constituted as "man's other." Woman is seen as immanent in patriarchal ideology, whereas man is seen as transcendent. As a result, feminism aims to define and safeguard equal political, economic, and social rights for men and women, as well as equal opportunities. As a result, Feminism studies the

distribution of power between men and women in order to achieve a gender-neutral viewpoint. As a result, it is founded on women's oppression and aims to liberate them.

2.2 The place of women in Kikuyu

The women in Gikuyu society are portrayed as having very little agency, especially when they are young. The decisions about their bodies (like potential circumcision or pregnancy) are controlled by men and do not include women's personal preferences or identities. The mother character also tells a story about when women ran the society. Whether it is apocryphal or not, the story makes clear that their bodies got in their way (the women being pregnant making them weak) and that they now feel disregarded. This suggests that the understanding of women's capacity to reproduce is seen as a burden, even to women.

Narratively, the women are frequently pawns in conflicts between men. Even when Muthoni does make a decision that goes against Joshua, it ends in pain and death. Nyambura falling in love with Waiyaki and her personal feelings are similarly only a plot point for Waiyaki's relationship with his community. Nyambura does not have her own struggle or journey and is a "flat" character, ultimately serving Waiyaki's narrative arc.

In the book, women in Gikuyu society are given low status. According to legend, it was not always like that. We learn that there was a time when women ruled the land. When Waiyaki asks his father, Chege, why antelopes don't run away from women but run away from men, Chege replies that women used to rule the land and its men. He tells him that women were harsh and owned everything, and they kept antelopes as domestic animals, like goats. Men resented women's harsh rule, so they got all the women pregnant and overthrew them. The antelopes ran away because women could not manage them. They know women to be weak, and thus they do not fear them. After hearing this story, Waiyaki understands why his mother owns nothing.

Women are shown to care for their children and homes, though they do not have much say in their homes. Muthoni's and Nyambura's mother, Miriamu, understands her daughters' struggles but cannot go against their father's will. This implies that women are under men's authority and have to obey men's decisions. Women also have to bear the consequences of the actions of their children. When Muthoni disappears to get circumcised, her mother takes the responsibility for her daughter's disobedience.

2.3 Feminist Interpretation in The River Between

In *The River Between*, Ngugi demonstrates his feminist inclination by exposing and combating patriarchy, elevating Muthoni and Nyambura as true heroines as they struggle for their rights to define who they are and to reject masculine designation of women as "the other."

Ngugi is a male author who attempts to address women's difficulties. Ngugi establishes right away that in both ridges, Kameno and Makuyu emerge as strong

characters that can hold their own to the finish. Muthoni and Nyambura are the Makuyu heroines, whereas Waiyaki is the Kameno hero. Joshua, an ardent Christian convert, abuses his two daughters by forcing them to give up their circumcision rite. Muthoni, the youngest of the two, chooses circumcision despite the tyranny. She is fully aware that her father Joshua is opposed, but she wishes to establish herself as an authentic African lady. Ngugi is attempting to dismantle the traditionally accepted idea that women are incapable of challenging males.

According to Letherby (2003), feminists attempt to dismantle the belief that women are incapable of acting and deciding, thinking and reasoning, and that they are more immature, weak, and helpless than adults. Ngugi did this on purpose to demonstrate his feminist character, because in a patriarchal society, few or no female children may question their dads in the way Muthoni does.

Another way Ngugi demonstrates his feminist sympathies is by portraying Muthoni as a brave woman who, despite the fact that her circumcision is unsuccessful, never regrets her decision. This is supposed to demolish the notion that women are inherently weak and incapable of enduring suffering. According to Eagleton (1983), feminists have responded angrily to the portrayal of women as docile, egotistical, and masochistic. This is precisely what Ngugi performs in the role of Muthoni. Nyambura is another character Ngugi molds into a heroine. Nyambura pays a visit to Muthoni in Kameno, where she had gone for circumcision without her father's permission.

Muthoni's rebellion and eventual death results in Joshua disowning her, and both Nyambura and her mother Miriam are barred from attending Muthoni's burial. Ngugi is exposing patriarchy here, which is a fundamental problem of Feminism. He then challenges patriarchy by instilling in Nyambura the resolve to defy her father's harsh hand and even falling in love with his adversary, Waiyaki. Ngugi demonstrates his feminist inclination in *The River Between* by exposing and combating patriarchy, elevating both Muthoni and Nyambura as genuine heroes as they strive for their rights in order to identify who they are and to reject masculine designation of the female as 'the other. Ngugi might be considered a feminist in this sense, as he fights for women's independence through the characters Muthoni and Nyambura.

However, some critics believe that Ngugi is not a true feminist because Nyambura's heroic character is primarily influenced by her love for Waiyaki. It may appear that Ngugi is implying that Nyambura's attitude or conduct is mostly due to her penis envy (Bennet and Royle, 1995). True feminists oppose this categorization of women, stating that their personalities develop independently of males and that their battle against patriarchy is a legitimate reason for their absolute liberation. Also, the fact that both Nyambura and Waiyaki are heroines and heroes reveal that Ngugi appears to be implying that girls cannot be heroines without men. When comparing Ngugi's Nyambura in *The River Between* to Martha in Dangarembga's *She No Longer Weeps*, it's clear that Martha battles oppression and even kills Freddy in order to completely

eliminate patriarchy, but Nyambura simply fights her father's patriarchal traditions for the love of Waiyaki. Muthoni's death also seems to imply that women who aspire to be self-sufficient would never succeed. As a result, while Ngugi is a feminist, he falls short of certain of the Feminist theory's demands, such as declaring women's elevation without the influence of males.

3.0 Conclusion

This study looks at pre-capitalist Gikuyu women's roles and how they altered as a result of colonization and other circumstances. Gada's worldview, which was centered on gender and age, governed men and women's authority and relationships. It indicates that, while Gikuyu women's status was not totally equal to that of men, the Gikuyu's integration into the colonial state exacerbated pre-existing inequalities. The establishment of male native authority, the commercialization and commodification of livestock, and the adoption of post-World War II social reforms, in particular, obfuscate the social standing women formerly possessed while boosting male economic and political influence compared to women. As previously acknowledged, these dynamics combined to change the female domestic and male public realms. As was the case with other pastoral women, this contributed to the marginalization of Gikuyu women due to their social position as pastoralists, colonized subjects, and females. Pastoral societies have changed even more in the post-colonial age as a result of urbanization, population growth, and the state-imposed program of sedentarization, which aims to integrate pastoral economies into national and international markets. As previously mentioned, Khalif, Coppock, and others conducted recent study among Gikuyu and pastoral women in northern Kenya, looking at women in the context of development policies, democratic movements, non-governmental organizations, and civil society activities. While the extent to which these movements have liberated women from repressive structures is arguable, it is obvious that women in poor nations have been further brought under the pressures of globalization, and their fights have remained isolated and localized. This raises more questions: what does oppression mean for women in general, and pastoral women in particular, given the emergence of democratic movements and equalization policies? Many research on pastoral societies, particularly women, have taken a state and global-centred viewpoint. This study calls into question such an approach. Such approaches, in my opinion, downplay the roles of women as historical players. To reconstruct women's roles in the post-colonial era, a forthcoming case study of Gikuyu women in northern Kenya will address these topics by extensively situating their experiences in social, economic, and political transformations, as well as, most crucially, in the Gikuyu cultural context. This would allow for a deeper understanding of the agency of women like the Gikuyu, who have been overlooked throughout history.

References

- Alazzawi, A. J. M. (2018). A Feminist Perspective in Ngugi Wa Thiong's Novel "Petal of Blood". *International Journal of English Literature and Social Sciences*, 3(5), 849 – 853. <https://dx.doi.org/10.22161/ijels.3.5.27>
- Amoko, A. O. (2005). The Resemblance of Colonial Mimicry: A Revisionary Reading of Ngugi wa Thiong'o's "The River between." *Research in African Literatures*, 36(1), 34-50. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/3821318>
- Bingah, P. (2019). Representation of Society, Home and the Self: An Intertextual Inquest into Ngugi wa Thiong'o's Weep Not, Child and Dreams in a Time of War. *Nairobi Journal of Humanities and Social Sciences*, 3(4). Retrieved from <https://royalliteglobal.com/njhs/article/view/547>
- Boehmer, E. (1991). The Master's Dance to the Master's Voice: Revolutionary Nationalism and the Representation of Women in the Writing of Ngugi wa Thiong'o. *The Journal of Commonwealth Literature*, 26(1), 188-197. <https://doi.org/10.1177/002198949102600115>
- Bongmba, E. (2001). On Love: Literary Images Of A Phenomenology Of Love In Ngugi Wa Thiong'o's "The River Between." *Literature and Theology*, 15(4), 373-395. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/23926293>
- Diouf, C. S. (2014). The Cultural Resistance to Missionary Schools in Kenya: A Study of Ngugi Wa Thiong'o's The River Between and A Grain Of Wheat. *The Journal of Pan African Studies*, 7(7), 26-35.
- Guyo, F. B. (2017). Colonial and post-colonial changes and impact on pastoral women's roles and status. *Pastoralism*, 7, 13. <https://doi.org/10.1186/s13570-017-0076-2>
- Macharia, K. (2012). "How does a girl grow into a woman?" Girlhood in Ngugi wa Thiong'o's The River Between. *Research in African Literatures*, 43(2), 1-17. <https://doi.org/10.2979/reseafritelite.43.2.1>
- Michael Pozo. (---). An Interview with Ngugi Wa Thiong'o. *STJHUMRev* Vol. 2-2. <https://stjenglish.com/wp-content/uploads/An-Interview-with-Ngugi-Wa-Thiongo.pdf>
- Nicholls, B. (2010). Ngugi wa Thiong'o, Gender, and the Ethics of Postcolonial Reading (1st ed.). Routledge. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315598253>
- Thiong'o, N. wa. (1965). *The River Between*. South Africa: Heinemann. <http://www.languageinindia.com/feb2017/pooraniriverbetween.pdf>