

Book Review: The River Between by Ngugi wa Thiongo

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The title of the book is called '*The River Between*' by Ngugi Wa Thiong'o¹ with 152 pages published in 1975 by Heinemann. It is part of the African Writer's Series and has been since then taken to be a classic as far as Africa is concerned. Famous Kenyan author Ngugi Wa Thiong'o released his debut book, 'The River Between' in 1965 as part of the esteemed African writers Series.² It narrates the tale of the rift between two neighbouring Kenyan villages brought on by disparities in religion, and is set in the early 20th century or so. This iconic piece of African literature³ vividly conveys the drama of a people and culture whose world has been turned upside down. The River Between investigates early European settlement life in the Kenyan mountains. The Gikuyu people are torn between those who

¹ Ngugi wa Thiong'o, original name James Thiong'o Ngugi, (born January 5, 1938, Limuru, Kenya), Kenyan writer who was considered East Africa's leading novelist. His popular *Weep Not, Child* (1964) was the first major novel in English by an East African. As he became sensitized to the effects of colonialism in Africa, Ngugi adopted his traditional name and wrote in the Bantu language of Kenya's Kikuyu people.

² The African Writers Series (AWS) is a collection of books written by African novelists, poets and politicians. Published by Heinemann, 359 books appeared in the series between 1962 and 2003. The series has provided an international audience for many African writers, including Chinua Achebe, Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o, Steve Biko, Ama Ata Aidoo, Nadine Gordimer, Buchi Emecheta, and Okot p'Bitek.

³ African literature refers to a body of traditional oral and written literatures in Afro-Asiatic and African languages together with works written by Africans in European languages.

dread the unknown and those who perceive an opportunity to choose between an attractive new religion and their own ancestral practices.

The conflict between the two communities of Makuyu and Kameno which are situated in the hills of rural Kenya during the colonial authority is the subject of this narrative. The two communities which are separated by a river coexist amicably despite their differences until Christian missionaries⁴ begin to set up shop close by. The narrative describes a young leader named Waiyaki's battle to bring Kameno and Makuyu together through suffering and sacrifice. The book is set in a mountainous area during the colonial era, when white settlers first came in Kenya's "White Highlands"⁵.

Two mysteries, Makuyu and Kameno are separated by a valley and the river Honia considered to be the source of life in Ngugi's renowned folktale. Gikuyu people who staunchly adhered to traditional rituals resided on Kameno, whereas those who had converted to Christianity and adopted European methods did so on Makuyu thus blowing the confrontation between these two frames of view. Waiyaki, the protagonist of the tale, is a young man who, while being only a teenager, makes women feel uncomfortable when he looks into their eyes. Waiyaki is charming and a natural leader among his people. He was raised traditionally but received his education in white schools. Waiyaki thinks that only through unification can their civilization survive and keep its own unique culture. When Waiyaki was still relatively young, his father had warned him about a messiah who would be familiar with both Gikuyu tribal customs and western customs.

Waiyaki returns to the tribe as an instructor after receiving his education at a missionary school and finds himself caught between traditional beliefs and Christianity. The more outspoken faction of the tribe, which calls for action, and Waiyaki's affection for Nyambura, the daughter of the area's fiery preacher Joshua, make his situation more challenging as can be reported from one part that,

⁴ A Christian missionary can be defined as "one who is to witness across cultures". The Lausanne Congress of 1974, defined the term, related to Christian mission as, "to form a viable indigenous church-planting movement". Missionaries can be found in many countries around the world

⁵ The term 'White Highlands' was derived from the official policy that certain agricultural lands in Kenya should be reserved for settlers of European origin.

"Waiyaki had waited all his life for this day, for this particular chance to show his courage like a man" (page. 45).

He was to be circumcised to be initiated to be a man and gain respect from everyone in the area and a kind of initiation, circumcision was a tribal custom that was opposed by Christianity, which was introduced and taught and taught in Kenya's colonial British administration-run schools.

They were vehemently opposed to female circumcision⁶ or female genital mutilation, depending on how non-tribal, traditional followers saw it. It was a disgusting practice to monotheistic adherents. Muthoni, Joshua's daughter, was a driven young woman. Waiyaki liked her because she wanted to become a lady through circumcision, but he passed away from the wounds from the procedure. However, a father's curse was allegedly the reason for her passing. Muthoni's sister, Nyambura strongly felt the pain of losing her sister and as fate would have it. The River Between in some ways reflects the hostility and resentment between many Kenyan groups, the conflict between Christianity and traditionalism, and the current conflict between various tribes' cultures. Ngugi succeeds in creatively but realistically showing cultural struggle as a result of colonialism on African society by presenting Kenya in the colonial era through the perspective of a native.

Battle lines are set between Joshua, a Kenyan who teaches Christianity and the need for peaceful coexistence with Whites, and Kobonyi, who urges the group to use force to expel the influence of Christianity and preserve its tribal traditions, such as circumcision. The novel's discussion of female circumcision is particularly compelling because it is framed as an ingrained issue and it is implied that such is part of the tribe's fundamental identity; in fact, it appears to be a symbol of the tribe to some level.

Waiyaki, who happens to be the story's main protagonist, is given a prophecy by his father that he will play a "messiah-like" role in saving the villages from annihilation by having a grasp of both Christian principles and tribal customs. The absence of white characters in this

⁶ Female Genital Mutilation is the practice of cutting away and altering the external female genitalia for ritual or religious purposes.

book is an intriguing feature and instead, the impact of 'whiteness' and Christianity on indigenous people is depicted through the shifting perspectives of the different individuals.

The voice of education in the book is Waiyaki, and I found Thiong'o portrayal of Waiyaki's determination to improve the region's children's access to a basic education to be immensely inspiring and encouraging. Waiyaki acknowledges that if any aspect of the nation's culture is to be preserved, individuals must learn to adapt to change, which Waiyaki believes is unavoidable.

However, rather than highlighting the value of flexibility, toleration and moderation, the book closes on a pretty dismal note. Waiyaki's attempt to utilise education as a bridge to end divisions ultimately fails and the gap persists. In this case, people seem to be drawn to one extreme or the other, identifying the extreme of emotions revealed instead of taking a more balanced and nuanced position. Waiyaki's failure is partly due to his love for Nyambura, who belongs to the "opposing" group in a Romeo and Juliet-style drama; however, rather than bringing the two groups together, their outcome is somewhat less positive. The River Between is also often regarded as a potentially romantic tale that illustrates the difficulties in totally committing oneself to a partner. In the end, Waiyaki makes an appeal for unity and enlightenment so that their people might fight for their political freedom and against the white colonizers as a unit. Waiyaki is opposed by Kabonyi, who asserts that he is the tribe's saviour and discloses Waiyaki's affection for Nyambura.

About the author:

He was a Teacher, novelist, essayist, and dramatist from Kenya whose works serve as a vital bridge between the forerunners of African literature and the newer postcolonial writers. Ngugi switched from using English as the main language of his work to Gikuyu, his native tongue, after being imprisoned in 1978. In many of Ngugi's writings, the shift from colonialism to post coloniality and the modernity dilemma, have been major themes. Ngugi wa Thiong'o was born as the third of his father's four wives' fifth child in Kamiriithu, close to Limuru, Kiambu District. Kenya was ruled by the British at the time; their rule ended in 1963. The Gikuyu, Kenya's largest ethnic tribe, made up Ngugi's family. His father was a peasant named Thiong'o wa Nducu. Ngugi converted to Christianity during this time.

He also experienced the Gikuyu rite of passage ritual at school and learned about Gikuyu history and traditions. Later, after rejecting Christianity, he changed his name from James Ngugi to Ngugi wa Thiong'o in recognition of his Gikuyu ancestry. He considered James Ngugi as a symbol of colonialism. Ngugi briefly worked as a journalist in Nairobi after earning a B.A. in English from Makerere University College in Kampala, Uganda, in 1963. He married in 1961. Over the next seventeen years his wife, Nyambura, gave birth to six children. In 1962 Ngugi's play '**The Black Hermit**' was produced in Kampala. In 1964 he left for England to pursue graduate studies at the Leeds University

In the 1960s Ngugi was a reporter for the Nairobi Daily Nation and editor of Zuka from 1965 to 1970. He worked as a lecturer at several universities - at the University College in Nairobi (1967-69), at the Makerere University in Kampala (1969-70), and at the North-western University in Evanston in the United States (1970-71). Ngugi had resigned from his post at Nairobi University as a protest against government interference in the university, but he joined the faculty in 1973, becoming an associate professor and chairman of the department of literature. It had been formed in response to his and his colleagues' criticism of English - the British government had made in the 1950s instruction in English mandatory.