

Colonial Conflict and Cultural Symbolism in Ngũgĩ wa Thiong’o’s *The River Between*

Sapanpreet Kaur

<https://orcid.org/0000-0002-4315-745X>

Thapar Institute of Engineering and Technology, Patiala, India

sapanpreet.kaur@thapar.edu

Abstract

The River Between by Ngũgĩ wa Thiong’o stands as a pivotal piece in African literature, probing into the intricacies of colonialism, cultural identity, and resistance in colonial Kenya. This article aims to offer a thorough literary-symbolic analysis of Ngũgĩ’s novel, particularly its portrayal of these themes. It focuses on the central symbols and characters, especially the river dividing the Gikuyu community, which represents the conflict between tradition and modernity. The river is used as a significant metaphor for the ideological and cultural rifts within the community. It symbolises both the physical and metaphorical separation between Kameno and Makuyu ridges, encapsulating the struggle to balance indigenous beliefs with colonial influences. The characters Waiyaki and Nyambura are analysed as representations of this tension, highlighting the personal and societal conflicts encountered while navigating between tradition and progress. Additionally, the circumcision ritual is discussed as a vital symbol of Gikuyu cultural identity and its role in the broader conflict between traditionalists and advocates of Westernisation. Through meticulous textual analysis and historical context, the article elucidates Ngũgĩ’s strategic use of language and symbolism to critique colonialism and celebrate the resilience of indigenous cultures. Thus, by integrating literary analysis with historical insights, the paper achieves a nuanced understanding of the novel’s themes, demonstrating how *The River Between* invites reflection on the complexities of cultural identity and resistance in the face of colonial oppression.

Keywords: colonialism; cultural identity; cultural resilience; indigenous belief system; resistance



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Introduction

The River Between by Ngũgĩ wa Thiong’o stands as a seminal work in African literature, delving deep into the complexities of colonialism, cultural identity, and resistance in colonial Kenya. Published in 1963, it was Ngũgĩ’s first novel and remains a cornerstone of postcolonial literature. The narrative unfolds against the backdrop of the Mau Mau uprising, reflecting the societal divisions and struggles of the time. At its core, *The River Between* explores the dichotomy between tradition and modernity, symbolised by the river that divides the two ridges of Kameno and Makuyu. This geographical feature serves as a metaphor for the cultural and ideological divide within the Gikuyu community. Characters like Waiyaki and Nyambura embody this tension, torn between preserving indigenous traditions and embracing the allure of progress. Ngũgĩ’s strategic use of language and symbolism adds depth to the narrative, particularly his incorporation of the Gikuyu language alongside English. This choice is a deliberate act of resistance against colonial domination, asserting the importance of reclaiming cultural heritage. The banning of the circumcision ritual ignites controversy within the community, highlighting the clash between tradition and external influences. Through a literary-symbolic analysis, readers uncover layers of meaning that critique colonialism and celebrate the resilience of indigenous cultures. Ngũgĩ’s background significantly informs his novel, drawing from his experiences growing up in colonial Kenya and witnessing firsthand the societal divisions and struggles for autonomy. His time as an assistant teacher during the Mau Mau uprising deepened his understanding of the consequences of disunity in Kenyan society. The portrayal of the Gikuyu landscape in his work is deeply influenced by specific historical circumstances in Kenya: the forced removal of the Gikuyu from the White Highlands, the Mau Mau independence war, and the post-independence disillusionment. Ngũgĩ himself acknowledges the profound connection between literature and historical events.

Literature does not grow or develop in a vacuum, it is given impetus, shape, direction and even area of concern by social, political and economic forces in a particular society. (Ngũgĩ 1972, XV)

Ngũgĩ integrates geography with his people’s cultural environment, religious belief, and economic system. In essence, *The River Between* offers readers a profound exploration of the complexities of colonialism and cultural identity, inviting scholarly discussion and reflection on the enduring themes of resistance and resilience.

From Literal to Layered: Exploring Deeper Dimensions in the Language of *The River Between*

This study employs symbolic interactionism as the theoretical framework to analyse the use of symbolism in Ngũgĩ wa Thiong’o’s *The River Between*. Symbolism, involving the use of symbols to represent complex ideas and themes in literature, is central to this analysis. The symbols in the novel are deeply embedded in the social and political context of postcolonial Kenya. As Meyer (2019, 174) observes, “Symbolism is the use

of symbols to represent ideas, emotions, or objects in a creative work of literature,” underscoring the significance of this literary technique. Symbolic interactionism emphasises the importance of symbols in social interaction and the formation of meaning. According to Blumer (1969, 2), “The meaning of a symbol is not inherent in the symbol itself, but is created and interpreted through social interaction.” Ngũgĩ uses symbols to reflect various facets of Kenyan society, grounding them in the people’s historical and social experiences.

An important shift in academic discourse, observed across numerous disciplines, is the “rhetorical turn” or “discursive turn.” This trend suggests that rhetorical forms fundamentally influence the shaping of realities (Chandler 2002, 123). Form and content are intertwined, making language a significant tool. Terence Hawkes (1972) explains that figurative language, as opposed to literal language, provides various ways to say “this is (or is like) that,” helping to make the unfamiliar familiar. Tropes, essential to understanding, are part of the rhetorical code—a system maintaining cultural reality by focusing on representation rather than content. While unusual metaphors may stand out, most figures of speech become transparent, subtly reinforcing societal assumptions (Lakoff and Johnson 1980). Repeated exposure to these figures supports our tacit agreement with shared cultural beliefs. Hugh Holman (1966, 1980) provides a detailed definition of symbols and symbolism, stating that a symbol is something that represents both itself and a particular objective reality, highlighting its allusive nature (1966, 42). He distinguishes between a symbol and an image by explaining that a symbol is more complex, evoking a concrete reality while implying additional meaning. For example, in *The River Between*, the river symbolises the land of Gikuyu divided by colonial impact, encompassing all the connotations associated with divided land and communities.

Bukenya’s analysis of symbolism aligns with Holman’s, stating that “symbolism means the representation of ideas and themes through objects, situations, or characters which may appear to be of little or no importance or relevance at the realistic level” (Bukenya 1986, 11–12). This perspective helps explain why seemingly minor actions in *The River Between* carry significant symbolic weight, representing abstract ideas and emotions that Ngũgĩ seeks to convey. In conclusion, the integration of symbolism in literature and academic discourse underscores the profound impact of rhetorical forms on our understanding of reality. Through the works of aforementioned scholars, it becomes evident that symbols are not merely decorative elements but pivotal tools for conveying complex ideas and cultural narratives. Careful analysis and interpretation of symbols remain crucial for a deeper comprehension of Ngũgĩ’s novel and the human condition it depicts.

Review and Reframe: Exploring Existing Literature and Uncovering Research Gaps

The River Between, a seminal work by Ngũgĩ wa Thiong’o, has garnered extensive scholarly attention for its portrayal of colonial and postcolonial Kenya, its exploration

of cultural conflicts, and its literary style. James Ogude (1999) provides a nuanced examination of Ngũgĩ wa Thiong’o’s literary works within African historiography. Ogude unravels the allegorical significance, character portrayal, and relevance of popular forms in Ngũgĩ’s novels. He explores how Ngũgĩ’s fiction intertwines with historical and political narratives, challenging colonial discourses and reconstructing Kenyan and African identities. This critique underscores the transformative power of narrative, positioning Ngũgĩ’s work as pivotal in reclaiming and reimagining African history and nationhood.

Simon Gikandi’s seminal work on Ngũgĩ wa Thiong’o delves into the symbolic use of elements in *The River Between* (Gikandi 2000). Gikandi emphasises the significance of symbols such as the Honia River, which represents both division and unity within the Gikuyu community. The river, referred to as the “river of healing,” symbolises the cultural and spiritual lifeblood of the Gikuyu people, bridging the opposing ridges of Kameno and Makuyu while also highlighting their ideological divides. He explores the symbolism of circumcision, a central rite in the Gikuyu community, embodying their cultural identity. This ritual, accompanied by the ceremonial mambura dance, represents the fusion of individual and communal desires, intertwining personal identity with collective nationalistic aspirations. The dance itself signifies the communal bond and shared heritage of the Gikuyu people. Gikandi primarily concentrates on the Gikuyu circumcision controversy, emphasising its cultural significance and the ensuing conflicts within the Gikuyu community. In contrast, this paper adopts a broader literary-symbolic analysis, encompassing a wider range of symbols such as the river, ridges, and rituals, and their roles in representing cultural and ideological divides. While Gikandi discusses the river mainly as a physical separator, this article delves into the river’s multifaceted symbolism, depicting it as a conduit of both division and reconciliation, integral to the characters’ journeys towards self-discovery. Additionally, this article provides a more comprehensive examination of the ridges and rituals, analysing them as embodiments of opposing cultural and religious ideologies. This article’s novelty lies in its broader symbolic analysis, interdisciplinary approach, and detailed character exploration, offering a more nuanced understanding of Ngũgĩ’s novel within the larger framework of literature dealing with indigenous resistance. Consequently, this article enriches the discourse on *The River Between* with its expansive and interconnected symbolic analysis.

Recent scholarship, such as that by Awasthi (2023), has begun to explore *The River Between* through an ecocritical lens. He explores Ngũgĩ wa Thiong’o’s focus on the historical aspects of Africa, particularly Kenya. Ngũgĩ seeks to correct misinterpretations by Western writers, highlighting Africa’s rich culture, traditions, and natural resources. His novels often emphasise characters’ harmony with nature. In *The River Between*, nature is central, with the relationship between characters and their environment being profound. Awasthi’s article examines the impact of colonisation on Kenya’s natural resources and Ngũgĩ’s eco-conscious perspective. Azfal and Zahir (2023) review Ngũgĩ wa Thiong’o’s depiction of the Gikuyu people’s cultural practices,

beliefs, and conflicts in *The River Between*. They analyse how characters and their interactions reflect African culture's complexities and colonial-era challenges. Their article explores cultural representation in *Weep Not, Child* and *The River Between*, highlighting the significance of cultural practices in shaping identities. Ngũgĩ's evocative descriptions and insightful quotations emphasise the resilience and importance of these practices during colonialism.

While significant scholarship exists on the use of symbolism in Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o's works, there is a notable gap in the application of symbolic interactionism as a theoretical framework to analyse his novel *The River Between*. Previous studies have predominantly focused on political and social critiques. The present article stands out for its comprehensive examination of central themes such as colonialism, the tension between tradition and modernity, and the struggle for identity, while also providing an in-depth discussion of recurring motifs and symbols that add layers of meaning to the text. Thus, it provides a nuanced examination of Ngũgĩ's use of metaphors and tropes in *The River Between*. For instance, the river itself serves as a central metaphor, symbolising the divide between traditional and modern values, the colonised and the coloniser, and the internal conflict within the protagonist. This metaphor encapsulates broader themes such as cultural disintegration and the quest for identity. Particularly notable is the article's analysis of Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o's literary techniques. It meticulously examines his use of language, narrative structure, and stylistic choices, allowing readers to appreciate the craftsmanship behind the novel.

The portrayal of nature as a symbolic element is another key focus. The landscape in the novel reflects the characters' inner states and the sociopolitical environment. The use of the hero's journey trope further emphasises the protagonist's path as a reflection of the larger community's journey towards self-awareness and resistance against colonial forces. Additionally, the article explores how other tropes, like light and darkness, represent knowledge and ignorance, or hope and despair. These recurring images reinforce the novel's central conflicts and the characters' struggles. The discussion also highlights Ngũgĩ's use of traditional African oral storytelling techniques, blending them with modern narrative forms to create a richly layered text.

Literary-Symbolic Analysis of *The River Between*

Symbols and Signs in the Novel

In *The River Between*, symbols play a crucial role in shaping the perceptions and interactions between the two cultures depicted: the mission culture and the Kikuyu way of life. The icon serves as a representation of how each culture views the other. To the mission, it represents salvation from what they perceive as the savagery and superstition of the Kikuyu, while to the Kikuyu, it symbolises the intrusion of foreign influence and the upheaval of their traditional way of life. One symbolic manifestation of this cultural dichotomy is the fever feelings experienced by the Kikuyu, which are interpreted as an illness brought on by the presence of the white man and his foreign culture. Kinai, a

character in the novel, articulates this belief when he urges Kamau to seek medical help from the mission for Waiyaki, citing the onset of these fever feelings as a recent phenomenon coinciding with the arrival of the white man. This demonstrates how symbols, such as illness and medical treatment, are imbued with cultural meaning and are used to justify adopting the practices of the colonial culture, such as seeking Christian medical care.

Geertz's framework (1973) provides valuable insight into understanding the significance of these symbols within their respective cultural contexts. He argues that symbols carry multiple layers of meaning and must be deciphered within the broader social and historical framework in which they are embedded. Applying Geertz's perspective, the Christian symbols introduced by the colonialists represent not only religious beliefs but also cultural superiority and domination. Meanwhile, for the Kikuyu, these symbols represent a disruption of their traditional way of life and the imposition of foreign values.

The River as a Symbol of Division and Separation

The river serves as a central symbol in the novel, representing not only a physical barrier between the two ridges of Kameno and Makuyu but also a metaphorical divide between tradition and modernity, indigenous beliefs and colonial influences. Its presence underscores the theme of separation and the struggle to bridge the gap between conflicting ideologies. Geographically, the river physically separates the communities of Kameno and Makuyu. This physical division mirrors the societal and cultural divide between tradition and modernity. It serves as a tangible obstacle that must be navigated by characters seeking to reconcile conflicting ideologies and bridge the gap between the two ridges. Beyond its physical presence, the river also represents a metaphorical chasm between tradition and modernity, indigenous beliefs and colonial influences. The communities on either side of the river inhabit different worlds with distinct value systems, customs, and ways of life. This metaphorical divide symbolises the broader struggle for identity and autonomy faced by the Gikuyu people in the wake of colonialism. The river acts as a symbol of separation, highlighting the fragmentation and discord within the Gikuyu community. It underscores the challenges of unity and solidarity in the face of external pressures and internal divisions. The river's presence emphasises the need for reconciliation and collaboration among disparate factions to overcome adversity and achieve collective goals. Throughout the novel, characters grapple with the implications of the river's presence and the ideological divide it represents. Waiyaki, in particular, is torn between his commitment to traditional Gikuyu values and his desire for educational advancement and social progress. His efforts to bridge the gap between Kameno and Makuyu reflect the broader struggle to reconcile conflicting ideologies and forge a path forward that honours both tradition and modernity. The river holds cultural significance for the Gikuyu people, serving as a symbol of ancestral heritage and spiritual connection to the land. Its waters are imbued with mythic resonance, representing the lifeblood of the community and the source of its vitality and resilience.

As the protagonist navigates this complex internal and external conflict, he grapples with the weight of history and the pressure to choose between preserving his cultural roots and embracing change. The river becomes a metaphor for his own journey towards self-discovery and finding a balance between the old ways and new possibilities. “The river was called Honia, which meant cure, or bring-back-to-life. Honia river never dried: it seemed to possess a strong will to live, scorning droughts and weather changes. And it went on in the same way, never hurrying, never hesitating. People saw this and were happy” (17). The river’s symbolic importance underscores the enduring legacy of indigenous traditions and the need to preserve cultural identity in the face of external threats. Thus, the river is a multifaceted symbol that embodies themes of division, reconciliation, and cultural resilience. Its presence underscores the complex interplay between tradition and modernity, indigenous beliefs and colonial influences, shaping the lives and destinies of the characters caught in its currents.

Ultimately, the river serves as a powerful metaphor for the struggles faced by the characters in the novel, reflecting the ongoing tension between preserving heritage and embracing change. Through its presence, readers are invited to contemplate the complexities of identity, belonging, and the impact of historical forces on individual lives:

A river flowed through the valley of life. If there had been no bush and no forest trees covering the slopes, you could have seen the river when you stood on top of either Kameno or Makuyu. Now you had to come down. Even then you could not see the whole extent of the river as it gracefully, and without any apparent haste, wound its way down the valley, like a snake. (17)

This vivid imagery sets the tone for the novel’s exploration of nature, culture, and the interconnectedness of all things. The river symbolises the passage of time and the constant flow of life, echoing the themes of change and continuity throughout the story. What is especially intriguing is the symbolism of the river as a snake, as quoted above. Snakes are often associated with duality and ambiguity in various cultures and mythologies. They possess both positive and negative connotations, symbolising both wisdom and cunning, life and death. Similarly, the river embodies contrasting qualities of unity and division, vitality and danger. By likening the river to a snake, the author highlights its dual nature as both a life-giving force and a potential source of danger or conflict. This duality reflects the complex interplay of forces at work within the community, including the tensions between tradition and modernity, unity and division. Contrarily, snakes are also seen as symbols of unity and interconnectedness, as they coil and wind their way through the landscape, connecting disparate elements. In the context of the novel, the river’s resemblance to a snake underscores its role as a unifying force that links Kameno and Makuyu, despite their differences. Despite being physically divided by the river, the communities of Kameno and Makuyu are metaphorically connected by its presence. The river serves as a lifeline, nourishing the land and its inhabitants and forging a spiritual and cultural bond between the two ridges. Snakes are also associated with transformation and renewal, as they shed their skins and undergo

periods of growth and rebirth. Similarly, the river in the novel symbolises the cyclical nature of life and the continuous process of change and renewal. The river's winding path through the valley reflects the ebb and flow of time, as well as the resilience of nature in the face of external pressures. Its presence serves as a reminder of the inherent dynamism and vitality of the land and its people. However, snakes can also symbolise danger and conflict, particularly when they are perceived as threats or adversaries. In the novel, the river's resemblance to a snake suggests the potential for discord and division between Kameno and Makuyu, as well as the dangers inherent in navigating the divide between tradition and modernity. The river's swift current and unpredictable nature serve as metaphors for the challenges faced by the characters as they strive to reconcile their cultural heritage with the pressures of colonialism and societal change. Therefore, I believe that the symbolism of the river as a snake carries multiple layers of meaning, reflecting themes of duality, unity, transformation, and conflict within the novel. Its imagery serves as a powerful semiotic device that enhances the narrative's exploration of cultural identity, resilience, and the struggle for autonomy in the face of external pressures.

The Ridges and the Symbolic Significance of Traditional Rituals

Kameno and Makuyu symbolise opposing cultural and religious traditions within the Gikuyu community. The tension between these two ridges reflects broader themes of cultural identity, assimilation, and resistance. Kameno is depicted as a bastion of traditional Gikuyu customs and spirituality. It embodies a way of life rooted in indigenous beliefs, rituals, and practices that have been passed down through generations. The people of Kameno adhere staunchly to these traditions, viewing them as essential components of their cultural identity and heritage.

The sacred grove in Kameno, where Gikuyu and Mumbi are said to have stood, serves as a focal point for reverence and homage, symbolising the community's deep connection to its ancestral roots and spiritual foundations. In contrast, Makuyu represents the encroachment of colonialism and Christianity into Gikuyu society. The inhabitants of Makuyu have embraced Western education and Christian faith, adopting new ways of thinking and living that challenge traditional norms and values. This clash of ideologies and values between Kameno and Makuyu reflects the broader struggle within Gikuyu society to balance tradition with modernity. The tension between these two communities highlights the ongoing debate over cultural preservation versus adaptation in a rapidly changing world, as described by the following: "Joshua was against such initiation rites, especially the female circumcision, which was taking on a new significance in the relationship between Makuyu and Kameno" (35). Joshua's opposition to the initiation rites symbolises a shift towards more progressive beliefs within Gikuyu society. The conflict over these practices underscores the complexities of cultural identity and the need for communities to navigate between tradition and progress. On this note, Gikandi (2000, 39) states that "Christian conversion was the colonial subject's point of modernity," which implies "a self-willed *dedoublement* from

a set of cultural values that had been at the foundation of one's communal identity." The presence of missionary schools and churches in Makuyu underscores the influence of colonial forces on the community's cultural landscape. The predominance of the trope of education and self-making in Ngũgĩ's work is much prevalent as the culture of colonialism. The characters in Makuyu, such as Joshua and Jacobo, serve as conduits for colonial ideologies, advocating for the abandonment of traditional practices in favour of Westernisation and assimilation. Their actions and beliefs symbolise the erosion of indigenous culture and the pressures faced by marginalised communities under colonial rule. The tension between Kameno and Makuyu reflects broader themes of cultural identity, assimilation, and resistance within the Gikuyu community. The rivalry between these two ridges mirrors the internal divisions and external pressures faced by indigenous peoples grappling with the forces of colonialism and modernity. The banning of the circumcision ritual by Christian missionaries serves as a catalyst for conflict between Kameno and Makuyu, exacerbating existing tensions and the divide between traditionalists and proponents of Westernisation. This conflict underscores the struggle for cultural autonomy and the resilience of indigenous traditions in the face of external threats. Kameno and Makuyu symbolise opposing world-views and value systems within the Gikuyu community. They represent the dichotomy between tradition and modernity, indigenous beliefs and colonial influences. The physical proximity of these ridges highlights the proximity of these ideological forces, as well as the potential for conflict and reconciliation between them. In summary, Kameno and Makuyu serve as symbolic representations of the tensions and conflicts inherent in the collision of traditional Gikuyu culture with colonialism and modernisation.

Waiyaki and Nyambura

The characters of Waiyaki and Nyambura embody the conflicting forces at play in the novel. Waiyaki is portrayed as a young leader from Kameno who embodies the values and traditions of his community. He is deeply rooted in indigenous customs and spirituality, and he becomes a symbol of resistance against colonial oppression and cultural assimilation. Waiyaki's leadership qualities and commitment to preserving Gikuyu traditions make him a powerful figure in the struggle for cultural autonomy. Throughout the novel, Waiyaki faces numerous challenges and conflicts as he navigates the complexities of his role as a leader and mediator between Kameno and Makuyu. "In *The River Between*, the Kenyan author seeks a synthesis between Christianity and Kikuyu traditional belief systems and practices in the character of Waiyaki. It is not an easy effort" (Indangasi 1997, 195). His steadfast dedication to his beliefs and his willingness to defy societal expectations underscore his role as a symbol of cultural resilience and resistance against external pressures. Nyambura represents the younger generation of Gikuyu who are drawn to the promises of modernity and Western education. She is depicted as a product of Makuyu's embrace of Christianity and colonial education, embodying the tensions between traditional beliefs and the allure of Westernisation. Nyambura's internal conflict reflects the broader struggle faced by many young people caught between tradition and modernity. Despite her Christian upbringing and education, Nyambura grapples with feelings of guilt and ambivalence

as she struggles to reconcile her faith with her cultural heritage. Her forbidden love for Waiyaki symbolises the internal conflict between her personal desires and societal expectations, highlighting the complexities of cultural identity and the sacrifices required to navigate between conflicting worlds. The forbidden love between Waiyaki and Nyambura serves as a powerful metaphor for the clash between tradition and modernity, indigenous beliefs and colonial influences. Their relationship transcends mere romantic attraction; it becomes a symbol of the larger struggle for cultural autonomy and self-determination within the Gikuyu community. The societal taboos and consequences associated with their love reflect the oppressive forces of colonialism and cultural assimilation that seek to suppress indigenous traditions and values. Despite these obstacles, Waiyaki and Nyambura's love becomes a testament to the resilience of the human spirit and the enduring power of cultural identity. In gist, Waiyaki and Nyambura serve as symbolic embodiments of the conflicting forces at play. Their characters represent the struggle between tradition and modernity, resistance and assimilation, highlighting the complexities of cultural identity and the personal sacrifices made in the face of societal expectations.

Circumcision Ritual and its Symbolic Significance

The initiation rites of circumcision and female clitoridectomy serve as definitive symbols of adulthood for boys and girls among the Gikuyu. Purity holds significant importance, with the circumcised revered while the uncircumcised are shunned, as depicted in the novel's portrayal of societal attitudes. Ngũgĩ's narrative delves into the division between two Kikuyu groups: the Christian-influenced faction, impacted by white missionaries, and the traditional Gikuyu staunchly holding on to ancestral ways. Ngũgĩ's sorrow for this historical division is palpable, reflecting broader societal tensions during the novel's setting. The imposition of the white man's religion instilled guilt and shame upon traditional Gikuyu, leading to a struggle with identity and societal place. This internal conflict is epitomised in characters like Nyambura, torn between her Christian faith and a yearning for her circumcised counterpart, Muthoni. Such conflicts have contributed to the gradual erosion of traditional practices from Kenyan culture. Despite these losses, initiation into adulthood remains a pivotal moment of transition and identity formation. The passage also underscores a sense of unity among circumcised Gikuyu, symbolising a united front against external pressures threatening their heritage. These insights are supported by Hopkins's (1999) examination of colonialism in Kenya, highlighting the impact of white missionaries and colonial policies on traditional African societies. Additionally, Anderson's (2005) exploration of British colonialism provides valuable historical context, illuminating the suppression of resistance movements and its consequences on indigenous cultures, thus enriching our understanding of the societal tensions and divisions depicted in the novel:

Sometimes in the bush, he and the other boys played Demi na Mathathi. One day a boy from Koina told Waiyaki: "You cannot be Demi." "Why?" he asked. The other boys came round. "You are not ready for circumcision. You are not born again." Waiyaki looked at the ground and felt small. (Anderson 2005, 23)

This conversation between Waiyaki and the other boys in the novel encapsulates the significance of circumcision within the Gikuyu community and its impact on individual identity and social standing. In Gikuyu culture, circumcision serves as a pivotal rite of passage from adolescence to adulthood, symbolising the transition from boyhood to manhood. It is not merely a physical act but carries deep cultural and spiritual significance, marking the individual's readiness to assume adult responsibilities and roles within the community. The conversation highlights the importance placed on circumcision as a marker of maturity and social status, as evidenced by the boys' assertion that Waiyaki cannot participate in certain activities because he is "not ready for circumcision." The conversation also underscores the social pressure and stigma associated with uncircumcised boys within the community. Waiyaki's exclusion from the game of *Demi na Mathathi* because of his uncircumcised status reflects the social norms and expectations surrounding circumcision. For Waiyaki, being told that he is "not ready for circumcision" and feeling small as a result speaks to the internalised sense of inadequacy and exclusion that can arise from not conforming to societal expectations.

Additionally, this conversation touches on broader themes of tradition and modernity within the novel. The insistence on circumcision as a prerequisite for participation in certain activities reflects the adherence to traditional Gikuyu customs and values. At the same time, it also highlights the tension between tradition and modernity, as evidenced by the mention of being "born again," which suggests the influence of Christian beliefs and Western ideologies on the community's perception of identity and belonging. Therefore, this conversation serves as a microcosm of the broader themes of tradition, identity, and social pressure within the novel. It underscores the significance of circumcision as a cultural practice and its impact on individual identity and social dynamics within the Gikuyu community:

As the sun shone on his skin, he held his muscles taut and shut his eyes, trying to recapture the feeling of importance he had experienced in the days of waiting. The anticipation had been sweet. Now it did not matter. Only after today he would be ready for the biggest of all rituals, circumcision. This would mark his final initiation into manhood. Then he would prove his courage, his manly spirit. (24)

The protagonist's thoughts raced as he contemplated the challenges and responsibilities that awaited him after his circumcision. The weight of tradition and societal expectations loomed large, shaping his understanding of what it meant to be a man in his community. The circumcision ritual, symbolising the rite of passage from adolescence to adulthood within the Gikuyu community, marks a significant moment of transition for young men, signifying their readiness to assume adult responsibilities and roles within the community. The ritual is deeply ingrained in Gikuyu culture and serves as a cornerstone of traditional identity and heritage. Through the circumcision ritual, young men undergo a physical and spiritual transformation, symbolising their initiation into the social and cultural fabric of their society. The ritual reinforces bonds of kinship and community, as well as the transmission of cultural values and traditions from one generation to the next. It embodies the preservation of Gikuyu cultural heritage and

identity. It is a sacred tradition that has been passed down through generations, serving as a symbol of continuity and resilience in the face of external pressures and influences. The ritual reflects the deep connection between the Gikuyu people and their ancestral roots, as well as their commitment to upholding traditional customs and values. By participating in the circumcision ritual, young men reaffirm their allegiance to their cultural heritage and the legacy of their ancestors. The ritual serves as a reminder of the importance of preserving indigenous traditions and resisting attempts at cultural assimilation and erasure. The banning of the circumcision ritual by Christian missionaries sparks controversy and division within the community, highlighting the tensions between tradition and progress, autonomy and external control. The missionaries view the ritual as a pagan and barbaric practice that must be eradicated in favour of Western values and beliefs. The prohibition of the circumcision ritual creates a rift within the community, pitting traditionalists against proponents of Westernisation and Christianity. This conflict underscores the broader struggle for cultural autonomy and self-determination in the face of colonial domination. It also highlights the clash between indigenous beliefs and external influences, as well as the challenges of navigating between tradition and modernity. The controversy surrounding the circumcision ritual reflects broader themes of tradition and progress within the novel. It symbolises the tension between preserving cultural heritage and embracing social change, as well as the complexities of navigating between tradition and modernity in a colonial context. Characters like Waiyaki, who advocate for the preservation of indigenous traditions, embody the struggle to maintain cultural autonomy and identity in the face of external pressures. Their resistance to the banning of the circumcision ritual underscores the resilience of indigenous cultures and the importance of upholding traditional values in the midst of societal upheaval. In summary, the circumcision ritual in *The River Between* serves as a pivotal event that symbolises the transition from adolescence to adulthood, the preservation of cultural heritage, and the tensions between tradition and progress, autonomy and external control. Its prohibition by Christian missionaries sparks controversy and division within the community, highlighting the broader struggle for cultural autonomy and identity in a colonial context.

Narrative Structure and its Symbolic Analysis

The River Between employs a mythic narrative, offering a symbolic approach to history that transcends empirical analysis. It presents history as a pattern of human civilisation, infused with divine realisation, and utilises myth to convey a reality that goes beyond empirical procedures. Myth has a symbolic dimension and depth to picture the reality and set the image which is above reality itself as the imitation of human acts. All of the symbols represent the creation of Kenyan unity through a different approach. Waiyaki represents the image of unity in intellectual civilisation. He is struggling to unite his people through educating them to accept the presence of British civilisation in Kenya. His effort can be seen by building the school named “Siriana,” which suggests a mirroring symbol of the “alliance” school in Makerere. He fails to get the support the British have given to him; a lot of opposition is coming from his own people, especially

from the tribe leaders. Like during the colonial period, where many intellectual people collaborated with the colonisers to gain their own benefits, Waiyaki is under pressure from a political oppositional movement from settlers, and this causes confusion for him to choose his path to unite his people. In a modern context, we can take Waiyaki as a reformer figure who is sought by his nation to reach the national ideal. He unites his people through changing their tradition to accept a new order of civilisation, a thing that is hard to do and often we see it as a failure for him. Muthoni, as Waiyaki's lover who symbolises the pureness and soul of Gikuyu people, sacrifices her life when trying to reach the high value of unity. This is a parody of the colonial period where many people are offered as a sacrifice event to reach freedom and unity ideal. Muthoni's death is a starting point of Waiyaki's failure. After knowing this condition, Waiyaki questions his rebellion towards the British and views his attempt as a Christ's rebellion. This series of events is an allegory of Jesus's last days in an attempt to unite humans and offer an alternative salvation for Gikuyu people reading the New Testament that has been opposed by Kenyatta.

Analysing Narrative Devices and Their Implications

In this novel, various semiotic narrative devices have been employed as tools to convey the intended messages and themes. These devices include symbolism, metaphors, similes, and allegory, all of which have a close association relevant to the study of signs and understanding them correctly is important to the understanding of the themes and issues within the text. The first example is when Chege informs his son Waiyaki that he is the final descendant in their line and is meant to fulfil the prophecy of saving their people. Waiyaki felt "as if a heavy cloud was pressing down his soul" (30). This simile underscores the immense burden Chege has placed upon him. Throughout the narrative, Waiyaki struggles with this burden. Even as he takes pride in his achievements, he remains preoccupied with the prophecy, continually questioning if it truly refers to him. Secondly, when Waiyaki addresses his community about education, he is depicted "like a shepherd speaking to his flock" (78). This simile evokes the image of Jesus addressing his disciples, a familiar motif in the Bible. Consequently, Waiyaki is perceived as the saviour of his tribe, guiding his people towards the realm of education. Ngũgĩ's use of this Christian allusion is significant, as it illustrates how Waiyaki navigates both the colonial and Kenyan worlds.

Ngũgĩ describes Joshua's realisation regarding the darkness of the ignorance of his people as "he felt the depth of the darkness in which they lived. He saw the muddy water through which they waded unaware of the dirt and mud" (29). These metaphors reveal Joshua's strong antagonism towards the tribal customs he once followed. He views his people as living in darkness, in desperate need of Christ's light for salvation. Additionally, he compares their existence to wading through mud, indicating that they are sullied and require cleansing by Christ, a transformation Joshua aims to facilitate. Regarding his own family, Joshua reflects, "Religious uniformity in his own home was binding. He meant to be an example to all, a bright light that would show the way, a rock on which the weak would step on their way to Christ" (30). First, Joshua's use of

the metaphor of a bind suggests the strictness with which he runs his household, explaining why Muthoni and Nyambura feel stifled. Second, he sees himself as a guiding light, illuminating the errors of those in darkness. Third, Joshua likens himself to a rock, providing a firm foundation for others to step on as they move towards Christ. These metaphors collectively highlight Joshua's high self-regard.

Allegory and its Role in the Narrative

Recent studies on postcolonial theories have attempted to redeem the notion of allegory from its traditional conception as “a constrained and mechanical mode of expression” (Slemon 1988, 157). Postcolonial writers have repurposed allegory as a strategy to counter the coloniser's reconstruction of the colonised. This reappropriation stems from their belief that allegory has historically been used as a means of speaking for the subjugated others within the European colonial enterprise, effectively subordinating the colonised through the politics of representation. It is easy to understand why Ngũgĩ employs allegory in his stories. Having grown up under colonial rule and been directly affected by it, Ngũgĩ experienced the loss of his brother in the Mau Mau uprising and had to work on settler farms as a young man because his parents were landless: “My father and his four wives had no land. They lived as tenants-at-will on somebody else's land” (Ngũgĩ 1972, 48). Nothing exemplifies this flux more vividly than the personification of the two ridges and the valley of life in *The River Between*. Ngũgĩ's restoration project is embodied by the land, which serves as the novel's larger-than-life character. The land not only provides the physical setting for the characters' lives to unfold but also represents a force with which they can identify (Gikandi 1984, 237). The rift in the tribe has a literal meaning at a basic level. The advent of the white man brings with it education, Christianity, and all the good and ill of secularism. Some members of the tribe leave to attend the mission run by the white Christians, where they learn to read and write. Others become converts to Christianity, but it is mainly the younger generation, of whom Waiyaki is prime. Ogude (1999) affirms that “the conflict is essentially about creating a new mythos for the community and at the heart of this struggle it is the privileged voice of the Africans, with their tensions and contradictions, that is heard,” further elucidating that “Ngũgĩ, as one of the more influential thinkers of Kenyan nationalism, responds to the problems of using history in the reconstruction of national identity through modes that highlight the tensions between the constructions of tradition and the implicit modernity of the nascent Kenyan nation” (Ogude 1999, 50). On a literal level, this represents acceptance of the new ways taught by the outsiders. The white settlers and the two ridges are two different paths for the tribe to take: the ridges represent either an isolationist approach, or an acceptance and tolerance of the newcomers. As a narrative device, the dual-path presents a constant choice for the characters to make, and the consequences of accepting or rejecting the new ways are readily apparent and constantly reinforced.

The Role of Language and Discourse in the Text

The selection and utilisation of language significantly influence how an individual perceives and defines themselves in relation to their society, natural surroundings, and even the cosmos. Thus, throughout the twentieth century in Africa, the language issue has been fundamental to the conflict between two opposing social forces: imperialism in its neocolonial phase and the struggling African people. African nations continue to be predominantly defined in relation to European languages, such as English, French, Portuguese, or Arabic, despite their status as former colonies. “Africa does not live in those languages. ... We have languages but our keepers of memory (writers and scholars) feel that they cannot store knowledge and emotions in African languages.” Ngũgĩ proclaimed this at a 1986 meeting entitled “A Conference of African Writers of English Expression” held in Kampala, Uganda (Ngũgĩ 2011). This leads us to explore how the British became involved in constructing a fresh, colonial, or “oriental” representation.

The River Between portrays an idealised representation of the Gikuyu culture during its initial encounter with European civilisation.

His narrative language in the early stories is structured by a simple trajectory: rejected by their families and communities because they cannot—or are unable to—fulfil their assigned cultural functions, the main characters decide to embrace their loss as the enabling condition of a new identity. (Gikandi 1984, 45)

This reveals notable progress in Ngũgĩ’s utilisation of language. He had developed a heightened understanding of the intricate patterns of English language and was able to skilfully include the biblical references, resulting in a more impactful portrayal. Ngũgĩ skilfully weaves together the rich tapestry of traditional stories and legends into the fabric of the novel. The initiation of the prophecy in the novel is conveyed through dialogue:

“You have heard of Mugo wa Kibiro?” “Yes.” “He was a seer ... he saw things ... the future unfolded before his eyes” “Mugo was born and grew up in Kameno before he went to tell people what he saw.” “For he saw many butterflies, of many colours, flying about over the land, disrupting the peace and the ordered life of the country. Then he cried aloud and said: ‘there shall come a people with clothes like butterflies ...’ People did not believe him.” (18)

However, rather than persisting in this combination of direct and reported speech, he theatrically presents the entire prophecy and incorporates it into the narrative. The narrative establishes a clear lineage between Waiyaki and the seer, emphasising their ancestral connection. “We are his offspring. His blood flows in your veins” (19). However, Waiyaki is aware that he is too young to bear the burden of becoming the final heir of the esteemed seer. Nevertheless, the employment of biblical terminology in this context intensifies his sensitivities. Being a missionary teacher and going to

Christian church services were the author's first experiences with English. It is hard to say what effect they had on his or her young, sensitive mind without knowing enough about the grammar of the Gikuyu language.

Conclusion

Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o's *The River Between* is a profound exploration of the complexities of colonialism, cultural identity, and resistance in colonial Kenya. Through rich symbolism and a narrative that intertwines tradition and modernity, Ngũgĩ captures the tensions and struggles within the Gikuyu community during a time of profound change. The river in the novel serves as a central metaphor for the division and potential unity between conflicting ideologies, reflecting the broader societal divisions caused by colonial influence. Characters like Waiyaki and Nyambura embody the personal and cultural conflicts faced by individuals caught between preserving their heritage and embracing new ways of life. Waiyaki's journey, marked by his dedication to education and cultural preservation, highlights the challenges of navigating between tradition and modernity. Similarly, the circumcision ritual, with its deep cultural significance, becomes a focal point for the clash between indigenous traditions and colonial impositions.

The novel's use of symbols, such as the river, the ridges of Kameno and Makuyu, and the circumcision ritual, provides a layered and nuanced critique of colonialism while celebrating the resilience of indigenous cultures. Ngũgĩ's incorporation of Gikuyu language and cultural elements further asserts the importance of reclaiming and preserving cultural heritage in the face of external pressures. *The River Between* invites readers to reflect on the enduring themes of resistance, cultural identity, and the quest for autonomy. Through its literary and symbolic analysis, the novel underscores the importance of unity and reconciliation in overcoming the divisions imposed by colonialism. The novel also reflects the broader linguistic and cultural tensions in post-colonial Africa. The dominance of European languages in African literature and scholarship underscores the ongoing struggle between imperialism and the quest for an authentic African identity. Through *The River Between*, Ngũgĩ not only tells a compelling story but also critiques the colonial and neocolonial forces that continue to shape African societies.

In conclusion, *The River Between* is a powerful narrative that uses mythic structures and symbolic analysis to explore the complexities of colonialism, tradition, and the quest for unity. Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o's masterful storytelling and linguistic prowess provide a poignant reflection on the historical and cultural struggles of the Gikuyu people, offering readers a profound understanding of the challenges and triumphs that define their journey.

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