

Bridging the Gap of the Religious Divide in *The River between* by Ngugi Wa Thiong'o

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Abstract: *This article revisits the colonial and post-colonial period through the struggle for cultural and identity issues specific to the Kenyan people about whom the novel entitled The River Between witnesses. The crisis that dominates the novel requires the figure of a conciliator to allow the rise of a peaceful and free Africa from the white missionary and his henchmen. In addition to the religious context, the political, cultural and economic dimensions of the spoliation of Africa's assets must also be examined.*

Keywords: Colonization, Post-colony, identity issues, crisis, conciliator

1. Introduction

While all societies are a prey to conflicts, the difference between them lies not in the outbreak of conflict but rather in the ways to recover from the crisis. As Edgar Morin puts it in *"Pour une crisologie"* (Morin, Edgar, 2012: 135-152), while the word "crisis" initially referred to critical decisions made in crucial circumstances, it is limited today to the peripeteias of conflicts. In *The River Between* by the Kenyan writer Ngugi wa Thiong'o, we notice an attempt at making a decision to overcome the prevailing religious divide at all levels of the novel: from the expository passage to the falling action, through the words and actions of certain characters.

The crisis was sparked off by the arrival of the colonizer with a new belief shown as better than African ways. Ngugi decides to criticize this through his works and tries to address its harmfulness. In *The River Between*, the conflict breaks out when Kameno and Makuyu stop sharing the same belief. The two ridges that were then involved in the traditional ways now have to choose either African tradition or the missionary's belief, hence the fight between both beliefs. Some of the characters will overcome this divide through a middle ground that accommodates both beliefs.

Our analysis, which is predicated on this social issue, therefore lends itself to a socio-critical approach. Sociocriticism will help us better identify and decode the crises, tensions and contradictions in the Kenyan society as pointed out by Terry Eagleton when he states that: *"Literature, (...), is vitally engaged with the living situations of men and women: It is concrete rather than abstract, displays life in all its rich variousness, (...)"*. (Eagleton, Terry, 1998: 171). Literature in fact, exposes all the richness of life in its concrete aspect rather than the abstract side.

Thus, using this theory, we intend first of all to analyse the signs of division in the Kenyan society. In the next part, we shall tackle the fight for identity. Finally, we shall focus on the possibility of conciliation and freedom through actants' doings.

2. Analysis of the Signs of Division

The narrative in *The River Between* reveals the identification of the signs of conflicts and divisions in the Kenyan population. For example, on page 1, there are elements of discrepancy and division through nature. The river, the animals, the land and religious symbols are all elements that bear witness to the prevalence of crisis in the Kenyan society.

To better understand that division that will take place in the narrative, at the opening of the novel, the narrator starts a description that looks like the mapping of a social conflict. He focuses on words that speak volumes and all this is given as follows:

The two ridges lay side by side. One was Kameno, the other was Makuyu. Between them was a valley. It was called the valley of life. Behind Kameno and Makuyu were many more valleys and ridges, lying without any discernible plan. They were like many sleeping lions which never woke. They just slept, the big deep sleep of their Creator.
(...).

When you stood in the valley, the two ridges ceased to be sleeping lions united by their common source of life. They became antagonists. You could tell this, not by anything tangible but by the way they faced each other, like two rivals ready to come to blows in a life and death struggle for the leadership of this isolated region. (Ngugi, 1965: 1)

From the above quotation, one can easily identify two important words that are pregnant with meaning. It is all about "lay" in the first sentence of the first paragraph and "stood" in the first sentence of the second paragraph. The mapping suggests polarities through "lay" which has to do with horizontality and "stood" that refers to verticality. Verticality is a position that reveals stasis, rigidity, strength and pride, while the horizontality points out movement, death, alterity, etc. When both come to meet, this gives life to confrontation. Though the latency of such a confrontation is only visible in the form of the sleeping lions, the crisis is blooming. The potential conflict can be perceived in the way both ridges are set.

The positioning of elements in the Kenyan space illustrates the opposition of the two village settings. It makes out a clear rigidity, tension, verticality and domination in the Kenyan space. The quotation also includes words like “side by side”, “one....the other”, “two rivals”, “life and death struggle” as verbal signs of the opposition between Kameno and Makuyu articulated by the narrator

Not less important is the evocation of lions in the introductory passage of *The River Between*. This is clearly noticed in the first paragraph. Before any interpretation of the quotation from the text, it is worth trying to understand this animal through legends, mythologies and the Bible.

The lion in many legends and mythologies has been defined in several ways. As for the Babylonian goddess *Ishtar*, she was represented driving a chariot drawn by seven lions (Garai, Jana, 1973:15-19) to show her power. A human being driven by lions proves his superiority by taming so furious and dangerous animals. She was doing this in her capacity as the goddess of love and war. She was a violent and powerful goddess who struck terror to the hearts of gods and men alike. Representing her by lions means she embodies fear and danger.

The Bible also seems very clear about the role of lions when the Prophet Amos says: "The lion hath roared, who will not fear? The Lord GOD hath spoken, who can but prophesy?" (Amos, 3; 8). In this biblical verse, the parallel made by Amos, comparing the lion to God seems strange. Just as people fear only its roar, so must they fear God. Accordingly, the lion stands for power and domination. If its roar and representations alone inspire fear, then the animal itself should be a real peril. The sleeping lions in the text have an interpretation that builds upon the above mythological element in addition to the ideological correlations that can be created.

Indeed, the sleeping lions predict the fragility of the peace and order prevailing in the ridges. The lions harbingers the future conflict that will break out between the two communities and leave them to rivalry and predation.

Like the lions, other elements also contribute to this symbolism of division. Among them, we can quote the *Honia*. That river lies in-between the two ridges as a space that opposes and reconciles them at the same time. It can therefore both settle the imminent conflict that will take place and better mark the polarisation of the opposition. That's why it lies in-between Kameno and Makuyu. This geographical position of the river probably serves the purposes of preventing them from fighting. From a linguistic perspective, its presupposing value makes it operate like an anaphora, that is to say a figure of repetition, the repetition of the epoch when the lion were once alive and reigning in violence. Anyway, the river permits to distinguish at a glance the two ridges geographically for they lay side by side of *Honia*. While water reconciles, it also divides. That's why *Honia* river stands in-between the belligerents like a judge, to settle the conflict between the two villages.

Water extends the notion of hybridity, for the two cultures or religions in Makuyu and Kameno will lose their purity and

authenticity. The concept of hybridity refers to the interaction and meeting of the cultures of the colonized and the colonizer. It helps discuss whether the encounter of both cultures will be in the predatory form of the lions or will take the turning point of in-betweenness. The notion of hybridity by Homi Bhabha helps us well understand the mixing-up of cultures at the colonial period through this quotation from Ania Loomba's book:

It is Homi Bhabha's usage of the concept of hybridity that has been the most influential and controversial within recent postcolonial studies. Bhabha goes back to Fanon to suggest that liminality and hybridity are necessary attributes of the colonial condition. For Fanon, you will recall, psychic trauma results when the colonial subject realizes that he can never attain the whiteness he has been taught to desire, to shed the blackness that he has learnt to devalue. Bhabha amplifies this to suggest that colonial identities are always a matter of flux and agony. It is always, writes Bhabha in an essay about Fanon's importance of our time, in relation to the place of the other that colonial desire is articulated, correct. (Loomba Ania, 1998: 148)

From this extract, we can understand that in *The River Between*, none of the characters from the two ridges is no more the same. They are born anew. The narrator finds how to bridge the center, the periphery and the rigidity, as a way of enhancing the idea that no single culture in that colonial era remains untouched and authentic. Each of the two has experienced change and can no longer be pure. Therefore, the process of colonialism involves changes in the culture of both the colonizer and the colonized in a way that neither side is independent of the other (Homi Bhabha, 1994: 116).

The invasion of the new belief, Christianity, in the life of African peoples, undermines their native religion, customs and anything that could represent their identity. Kameno defends African belief and Makuyu promotes the new faith. The two villages, or let's say religions, run by extremist leaders, Chege and Joshua, will remain divided for long. Far from teaching love and peace, faith-based conflicts are the source of division at all the different levels in the life of Kenyan people who have to fight for their identity.

3. Fighting For Identity

This work highlights a national ethos infused by a sacred narrative of divine mission given to Chege, the representative of the African tradition. In fact, the custodian of the Kenyan tradition living in Kameno will confront Joshua, one of the keepers of the same tradition, now converted into Christianity. Living in Makuyu, he is also the leader of the new faith. To better understand the fight between Kameno and Makuyu or Chege and Joshua, we had better go back to definitions and critics on identity.

The issue of identity is a crucial question for the colonial and pre-colonial era. During the colonial period, African peoples were under domination at all the levels so that they brought to negate their own identity. In *La carte d'identité*, Jean-Marie Adiaffi tries to define the notion of identity through this quotation that sounds like an instruction: "*Si tu veux assassiner infailliblement un peuple, si tu veux le tuer*

de science certaine : détruis son âme, profanes ses croyances, ses religions. Nie sa culture, son histoire, brûle tout ce qu'il adore et l'objectif sera atteint, sans que toi-même tu t'en aperçoives". (Adiaffi, Jean-Marie, 1980 : 39). Adiaffi makes it clear that to keep one's identity safe, we must struggle and save it in its totality.

On the same note, Huntington points out that we cannot talk about civilization while trampling on the history of peoples. He clearly states that : « *L'histoire des hommes, c'est l'histoire des civilisations. Il est impossible de concevoir autrement l'évolution de l'humanité (...)* ». (Samuel, Huntington, 1997: 37). According to him, removing an element from the cultural system cannot but distort and destroy people's identity.

As for Burke, his objective in the reading of *Identities and Social Structure* is to explain how processes of identity-verification may account for how societies are structured. For him, group boundaries are maintained insofar as each member verifies her or his social identity as or like other group members. (Peter, Burke, 2004: 5-15.)

This is also true in the narrative of *The River Between* by Ngugi. By underlining the clash between these two beliefs, Ngugi's narrator wishes to reveal the impact on African identity of such a religious conflict sparked by the civilizing mission of the Christian missionaries. This is reflected in the doing of Chege, who demonstrates that Kenyan people's religion has to be saved at any cost.

This is predicated on the use of symbolic elements such as Gikuyu and Mumbi, Adam and Eve, the snake, the mountain, etc. which are relevant to the fight for identity and freedom. At the opening of the book, the word "snake" (Ngugi, 1965: 1) is mentioned. Its evocation runs parallel with the remembrance of a myth.

The snake has a double nature. On the one hand, it elevates the spirit towards the spiritual world by developing knowledge; on the other hand, it stimulates the instinct of death. Its ambivalent nature gives it the ability to kill as well as to heal. It is a paradoxical animal. In mythologies and religions, the snake endorses a symbolism both positive and negative, protective and destructive, light and dark, good and evil. (Jean, Sadaka, 2014 :9)

The presence of the snake at the very beginning of *The River Between* makes sense. It probably reveals that if the colonizer wants to insert only his religion in Africa, he has failed for African peoples have their own divinities in which they already believe. The narrator wants to inform the reader that the new faith will not be welcome.

While for the white man the snake stands for the negative symbol of destruction, death, it also stands for a positive cosmic element for the tenets of African belief and myths. Indeed, for the latter group, it plays the role of a saviour and a deity.

To better reach his objective, Ngugi uses the myth of Adam and Eve who are supposed to be the first persons of the creation myths of many religions, including Christianity.

Through the narrative of *The River Between*, one easily understands that Western people came to Africa to open the mind of a population perceived as lacking in value and exogenous to the new faith. In opposition to that wrong idea, Ngugi compares Adam and Eve in his novel to Mumbi and Gikonyo, also supposed to be the first persons to live on the Kenyan land.

Thus, the missionary should not boast for victory because if God sent Adam and Eve to their land, they should not ignore that through Mumbi and Gikonyo, Kenyans also have their equivalent creation myths which teaches them why and how they were created (Ngugi, 1965: 17). So, the religion that the missionaries are mentioning is not superior to the one African peoples try at any cost to preserve. Like it, the mountain also serve to promote Kenyan identity.

The fight for identity in the novel could not have taken place had it not been for the presence of the mountain. In their desire to destroy African culture, the representatives of Christianity treat the local religion and many other local practices as evil customs. That point of view has been questioned by Chege who teaches his son Waiyaki about African ways by embarking with him on a heuristic walk round the mountains and hills and explaining him the hidden meaning of their environment. (Ngugi, 1965: 15). He underlines in that part of the narrative that African identity is a true one that should not be thrown away. The mountainous environment becomes in so doing an epistemic place, an open learning place. Chege implies that the followership which is induced by the adoption of the new belief is a replica of the lack of leadership in the understanding of one's culture; hence his desire to explain the rationale of things to his son.

The issue of identity is also reflected in the use of language in the novel. The use of local language in the novel is a way of preserving his African linguistic heritage. The missionary is not eroding only traditional beliefs, since he aims at destroying also the language in which the belief is being spread. To show that despite all the Kenyan population is still attached to their languages, the narrator of *The River Between* uses Swahili. Instead of saying the *tree of God*, he prefers mentioning the *tree of Murungu*. (Ngugi, 1965 : 15). This confers more authenticity to the novel. Ngugi wants African peoples to free themselves from the colonial power. In this regard, African peoples have to identify themselves through a specific language that is theirs. In the same vein, Kihika addresses this proverb to his audience in Swahili: "*Kikulacho Kiko nguoni mwako*". (Ngugi, 1967 : 15). He probably turns to Swahili to show that deep ideas can only be said in one's own language. Nonetheless, it can also be that the message is addressed to only African peoples and should avoid the control of the European colonizer.

In sum, *The River Between* is a novel in which one of the key themes is the fight for African tradition, for African Identity. The images and symbols all contribute to the parallels between both beliefs. The demonstration of the parallel between the two religions aimed to show that Africa was not a place of darkness deprived of all civilization when the European man arrived. The White man's claim to superiority finds a critical response in this novel through the

use of language and certain heuristic symbols. Beyond the counterpoint that compounds the divide, there are also signs of a synthesis focused on bridging the “self” and “other” gap.

4. Conciliation and Freedom through Actants’ Doings

The heritage of colonization leads some Africans to have conflictual relationships with their own people and tradition. As taught to them during and after colonization, the conversion to Western civilization confers better education and enlightenment. This is the case with some characters of *The River Between* where the fight against the guardian of African tradition seems obvious. Contrary to actants in harshly conflictual relationships, there are other characters in search for a common ground. Theirs is an attitude akin to a dialectical process of the search for a synthesis. Conciliation is how we term it in this paper. A certain number of characters play an important role in this process of conciliation. Thus, if Muthoni, Nyambura, Waiyaki, Chege and Joshua play a role for conciliation, many signs in their actions are important in this regard.

While fighting for the survival of African culture, Chege was to some extent fighting focused not only on freedom, but also on conciliation. The teaching of African realities to his son Waiyaki in the forest was the proof that for him, even if both Europeans and Africans have their own religions, there are similarities that could be shared. The critic discovers that through the walk in the forest, from the village to the hill on top of which we can find the sacred tree of Murungu, the narrative delves into the similarities of the two religions with their creation myths and God having much in common (Ngugi, 1965 : 14, 15). In this respect, fixed polarities are no more of any use since the purpose of those beliefs is the same. Ngugi’s characters reveal that if we consider the way of the Cross in the Christian religion to be good, the one of the African people seems similar. The walk from the village up to the hill has much in common with all the different steps of Jesus Cross in an African way.

As for Joshua, the character considered to be the main opponent to African tradition, Christian religion should be the religion of all African peoples. But he seems to change his mind after having been informed of the death of his once rejected daughter, who became marginalised for joining the tradition to be circumcised. In fact, Joshua was the leader of a community where he taught that all in African tradition is sin. As such, for him, there is no mercy for his own African fellows who remained with African divinities and tradition. The emotion felt by Joshua when his daughter Muthoni went to embrace African tradition through circumcision was close to stupefaction. Everybody even thought that he would be left unmoved by the death of Muthoni. However in the narrative, it is clearly said that “*A slight tremor in the voice when he spoke was the only thing that betrayed him*”. (Ngugi, 1965 : 53). It appears that he tries to control and hide his emotions but his voice reveals them.

In the above mentioned quotation, the narrator seems to reveal that the extremist Christian (Joshua) feels remorse. Muthoni being his own daughter, he could not be totally poised because of blood relationship. Her death is therefore

recalling to Joshua that whatever the religion, they share bloodlines. This is an indicator that though a person rejects his/her culture, that individual will one day return to it when faced with identity issues.

Another actant, who is important in this analysis in matter of conciliation is Muthoni. She is the leading figure of conciliation and freedom. With a father like Joshua, undergoing such a decision is not easy for Muthoni. For her, being a Christian should not prevent any African from following the tradition. This idea is echoed as follows: “*Look, please, I – I want to be a woman. I want to be a real girl, a real woman, knowing all the ways of the hills and ridges.*” (Ngugi, 1965: 26).

From the above-mentioned quotation, Muthoni is not only trying to fight for her identity, but she is also trying to unite Chege and Joshua, the two rivals. Muthoni is at the same time evoking that the two civilizations, despite the possible differences, can live together. And to reinforce this idea, she recalls the history of her parents through these statements: “*Why! Are we fools? She shook Nyambura. Father and mother are circumcised. Are they not Christians? Circumcision did not prevent them from being Christians*”.

Muthoni becomes a reminder and enlightener when revealing that her parents were fully Christians with their feet in African tradition. If this has not been a misfortune for them it means that anybody including Muthoni and her sister can make themselves circumcised without ever risking any condemnation. Anyway, beyond religion, the issue of circumcision has to be simply perceived as another kind of ideological tool colonization pointed out to negate African ways. This is underlined by Kihika in *A Grain of Wheat*. (Ngugi, 1967 : 85-86). Kihika means that his teacher is making the promotion of the Christian mission rather than reading the lines of the holy Bible. From the rebellion of Kihika, the critics can also think that he is fighting for not only recognition, but also for a certain acceptance and tolerance of African tradition by European religion. This seems to be the same fight with Muthoni and his father in the corpus.

Apart from characters, we also have signs that clearly show possibilities and images of conciliation and freedom. To that extent, if the sleeping lions (Ngugi, 1965: 1) can embody danger and conflict when they will wake up, they are also the sign of respect, security and freedom. The lions seem to stand as security guards to impeach anybody either from Makuyu or Kamenno, to fight. The image of lions also shows that the two cultures should remain untouched. The originality of each culture will permit the two ridges, Kamenno and Makuyu, to live in harmony and freedom.

Water is also one of the signs used by Ngugi’s narrator. Indeed, the Honia River reconciles the two opposed villages. Where there is water, all the matters are settled clearly for water comes to wash and purify. It helps distinguish all the aspects of the purified object. Where there is fiery conflict, water stands as a soothing force. Koné Klowinwélé underlines this when he argues that seas or rivers symbolize the frontier that marks the separation between two lifestyles. (Koné, Klowinwélé, Waves, 14 June 2011: 39,)

The presence of the *River Honia* stands to reconcile the two villages because in a space where the only place to fetch water is but that river, the inhabitants of the different villages have no choice but to live in peace. Whatever the problem, the river will stand for arbitration. The populations of Kameno and Makuyu should together take care of the River Honia that serves them for household and religious purposes.

In addition, through the pages of the corpus, we come across with some Swahili words and sentences. As illustration, the following pages mention the presence of a local language inserted in the English text. One can see many Swahili words in the narrative of Ngugi's works and all this makes sense. He symbolically initiates an intertextual process which aims to negotiate a place of expression for Swahili in a colonial context marked by the rising importance of English. In so doing, the narrator bridges the gap of linguistic purity. Beyond language, there is an ideological stance. Using the two different languages in the same text shows the desire of the narrator to horizontalize the relation between European and African cultures in *The River Between*. Horizontality therefore bridges the gap of vertical domination. That's probably why we can read Swahili terms such as *Agu and Agu* (Ngugi, 1965: 11), *Ali-li-li-li-li-li* (Ngugi, 1965: 12), *Murungu* (Ngugi, 1965: 15; 16).

Each of the above mentioned Swahili words interfere with the narrative to chip in the search for conciliation and freedom. To rearticulate the relations between both cultures in conflict, the narrator shows the parallel between the two linguistic spaces. Instead of mentioning one of the languages, he superimposes the two languages: "(...) from Agu and Agu, long ago". The mixing up of languages aims at the two populations in the narrative. Here, the narrator could have gone straight to the point, simply mentioning that the story he is telling is an age-old one. Refusing his population to be amnesic, alienated and dominated, he alternates Swahili and English words. After a word in Swahili, the word that follows is in English and after Swahili (*Agu and Agu*) as if the intention were to transform the narrative into a linguistic hodgepodge.

On page 86, the common ground between the two cultures is more obvious, with the presence of Waiyaki, the guardian of the African tradition, at his opponent Joshua's church, and also with the intertextual coexistence of the two languages in conflict. This sign of intertextual conciliation has ideological implications in the song of Joshua's churchmen sang in the two languages as follows:

*Uhoro Mwega niuyu
Niukiite Guku gwiitu
Uhoro Mwega niuyu
Wa Muhonokia witu.*

*Good news is this
Which has come to this our place
It is the good news
Of Christ our Saviour.* (Ngugi, 1965 : 86)

Although the message in the song is provocative and made Waiyaki go out of the church, we all the same notice that he has been in the church for the first time. The church is a

place where the guardian of the tribe, Waiyaki, has never wished to be before. For sure, when coming he got a message that he could unfortunately not deliver for in his inner thought, he was betraying the whole tribe. Anyway, this step is enough to talk about a possibility of dialogue between Waiyaki and the missionaries' henchmen.

The song is addressed to Waiyaki who is not supposed to be there, that is to say at church. Normally, while Waiyaki could have been seen as a spy at church, the song is amazingly welcoming the visitor. This ironically implies a search for common ground. That's probably why the group of Joshua accepted Waiyaki inside their church although he is not converted to Christianity.

The conciliation of the two religions seems to be the concern of the missionaries in the space presented in the above mentioned quotation through the poetic study of the verses used in a song sang by the choir of Joshua's church in the presence of their rival Waiyaki. To better understand the notion of conciliation, we'd better study the quality of the rhymes through the verses in the song. But before, let's have a definition from Beaudouin Valérie when he addresses the topic:

*Il ne peut donc y avoir de définition absolue de la qualité de la rime, elle se définit en référence à la langue pour un type de terminaison donné. Nous pouvons dire, parce que nous avons étudié les groupes de mots-rimes, que **désir** et **soupir** constituent une rime pauvre, **mou rire** et **pé rire** une rime suffisante et **secourir** et **mourir** une rime riche, parce que la situation dominante (largement majoritaire) pour les rimes en **ir** est l'identité de la consonne d'appui. En revanche, **jour** et **amour** constituent une rime suffisante, et **séjour** et **jour** une rime riche [...].* (Beaudouin, Valérie, 2002: 145)

As set forth in the above quotation, we can clearly notice that the end of the verses from the song is made up of vocalic rhymes:

*Niuyu = u yu
Gwiitu = I tu
Niuyu = u yu
witu. = I tu*

These vocalic rhymes used by the narrator are characterized by an alternation of *u yu* and *I tu* that the English translation cannot recreate. The translation dilutes the vocalic density. Putting the original text and the translated version next to each other creates a sort of hybrid textuality which stands for the new literary environment of Ngugi whose emergence is announced by Ngugi. Hybridity negates any pretence of purity and essence. It implicitly reveals that colonization leaves no one untouched and pure. There seems to be mutual understanding and acceptance for change and diversity in the Kenyan space.

5. Conclusion

If conciliation was to some extent difficult and almost impossible because of extremists like Chege and Joshua, through the fight of Muthoni to reconcile his people, the

ambivalence of some characters were brought to broad daylight. The different protagonists have a common destiny: existing in a world where confrontation is more destructive than negotiating a common ground. Promoting diversity is no favouring conformity but preserving the identity of each population. Images and signs that could be discovered through the reading participated to this promotion of the dialectical search for conciliation as a process to avoid alienation. That's why some characters and signs have made it possible to see that the cultural diversity can avoid cultural homogeneity and alienation. Intertextuality made this possible in the book. For the Self, peace is therefore possible by trying to understand and not wipe out the Other. This is what we mean by bridging the cultural divide.

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