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Women in Ngugi Wa Thiong'o's *The River Between* (1965)**Dr. Muktaja Mathkari**

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Abstract

Ngugi Wa Thiong'o through his literary works portrays patriarchy as a prevalent phenomenon that exists under the skin of society. He brings out how women are sexually, physically and mentally exploited, oppressed and ill-treated. Rape and successive pregnancies, verbal and physical violence, low payment to the domestic labourers, attribution of taboos to women, sexual oppression and abuse and objectification of women are some illustrious examples of the facets of oppression that women continuously experience in the African society which is highly patriarchal and determines women's identity.

Ngugi looks to women from feminist perspective. Most of his literary works concentrate on women's issues and Kikuyu culture to reveal women's major contribution in liberating the society from the male domination in pre-colonial, colonial, and post-colonial eras. The present article is a critical analysis of the selected novel of Ngugi Wa Thiong'o, *The River Between* in the light of feminist perspective to show women characters and their significant roles in the patriarchal system as well as the impact of colonialism on the roles of female characters and their relevant reactions to patriarchal power. In *The River Between*, the reader can easily understand how colonialism has cruelly deprived women from their role as active agents in the society.

Key Words: TRB= *The River Between*, W = Women, C = Circumcision, M = Muthoni, N = Nyambura

Ngugi was born at Kamiriithu, Limuru, near Nairobi on 5th January 1938, ¹ in Kenya. He is one of the best-known African novelists, playwrights and 'one of Africa's most prolific intellectual activists.'² He gained fame during the turbulent times of African independence and post-independence in the 1950s and 1960s. He is the recipient of many honors such as, the Lotus Prize at the Afro-Asian Writers Conference at Alma Ata, Khazakhstan in 1973 and Nonino International Prize for Literature in 2001.

Ngugi did his B.A. in English at Makerere University College in Kampala, Uganda (1959-1964) and M.A. at Leeds University, Britain in 1964. He was an adolescent during the Mau Mau War of Independence which was a militant African nationalist movement in Kenya (1952-1953) against British rule. His village Kamiriithu was destroyed and his mother was tortured because of his elder brother's involvement in the Movement. Achebe's *Things Fall Apart*, George Lamming's *In the Castle of My Skin*

(1953) and Peter Abraham's *Tell Freedom* (1954) had great impact and influence on Ngugi's views of West African, Caribbean and South African Literature. Therefore, his M.A. project work at Leeds University was on Caribbean Literature.

Ngugi's literary works are concerned with major social, cultural, and political problems in Kenya, the past and the present.

Ngugi draws the image of women in his novel, *The River Between* (1965) as active agents of their society in order to preserve its traditions and customs alive and free victims of patriarchy and colonization simultaneously. The novel brings out the clash between Westernism and African traditionalism in which women play vital roles to preserve the traditional Kikuyu culture alive. In the struggle and conflict between Westernism and African traditionalism, Ngugi presents Kikuyu women as active participants.

The novel narrates how British colonialism steadily encroached Kenya. It deals with Kameno and Makuyu which are two ridges. The valley between the two ridges is called the valley of life. The Honia flows through this valley. This river, both, separates and unites the people of the two ridges. It is due to the river; both the ridges can share their customs and have a good relationship. However, with the advent of colonialism, everything changes. Colonial institutions divide the people of the ridges, even make some of them enemy of each other by converting some of the residents of Makuyu to Christianity. The people discard their indigenous cultural practices and rituals, such as female circumcision, but Kameno remains unchanged and becomes a bastion of the traditionalists.

It is a story of the struggle between Christian Missionaries and the indigenous tribes and the long-lasting effects of colonialism and its consequences. The women characters struggle to emancipate from the clutches of the patriarchal society. The theme of the novel is the effects of colonialism on the native people culturally and traditionally and the destruction of their unified culture. Though people of Kameno and Makuyu are divided, they share the river Honia which is the essence of their survival. Hence, the novel shows that change is inevitable but when it comes to a traditional society it should be brought slowly and with understanding.

Women play important roles during circumcision ceremony which is one of the most important ceremonies and traditional customs of Kenyan-Kikuyu society. During the circumcision ceremony, youngsters are taught how to inculcate a sense of responsibility and preserve and protect the sanctity and unity of the community. They further learn to prolong the tribal traditions, religion, folklore and mode of behavior. The initiates get their admission into full membership of their society. By circumcision, cutting of a foreskin or clitoris, the Kikuyu people mean cutting away the childhood and become an adult. Thus, circumcision becomes the secret password of the community that allows the person to access into the tribe's secrets.

Ngugi boldly portrays Muthoni, the female protagonist of the novel as an assertive character. She desires to be independent and follow the rituals of her society. She does not want to be controlled under any circumstances. She is

the symbol of reconciliation because she is Christain and at the same time, she wants to be circumcised in order to improve her femininity. She tells Nyambura, her sister:

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.³

Joshua, the Christian convert of Makuyu and father of Muthoni and Nyambura, is very stubborn and disowns his daughters because they are not in conformity with him. Their mother, Miriamu is always in favour of her daughters but does not want her daughters to rebel against their father and wants her family to live together peacefully. ‘She {is} a peace-loving woman and she never {likes} unnecessary tension in the house.’⁴ She always asks her children to obey their father because she knows her husband very well that he is a staunch man of God and never refrains from punishing a sinner.

Through Muthoni’s character, Ngugi shows that women can bring about change in their society. Finally, Muthoni does her circumcision but the wound gets infected. Her health deteriorates and she dies in the hospital. The novel brings out that the heroines of Ngugi are firm believers in their cause and are ready to die for it.

Owing to Muthoni’s death, native people become aware that the new faith has contaminated the hills. Muthoni’s death becomes a turning point for the people of the ridges. ‘The power of hate and the ever-widening rift, generated, as it were, by Muthoni’s death, was enough to worry anyone.’⁵ It is after Muthoni’s death that Nyambura gets vexed with her father’s religion and transforms herself from a

submissive girl to an assertive girl. ‘The death of Muthoni had deprived her of the only companion she had ever had.’⁶ Nyambura does not want to live any longer with her family because she does not feel happy at home after Muthoni’s death. She gets weary of her father’s brand of religion because it is not associated with love and humanity for the native people.

Ngugi reveals that women can revolt and be pioneers. Waiyaki, the protagonist of the novel is impressed by his female counterpart, Muthoni’s revolution. He realizes her bravery and revolutionary act. Her revolution is a rebellion against the authority. Waiyaki cannot find that ability in himself. He thinks that if he were in her place, he would have not been able to do as Muthoni could do. Chege’s (Waiyaki’s father) words to Waiyaki are like a dream— to be a saviour of the land, while Waiyaki is inspired by Muthoni’s revolution to search for what is missing in the country:

Suddenly he thought he knew what he wanted. Freedom. He wanted to run, run hard. Run anywhere. Or hover aimlessly, wandering everywhere like a spirit. Then he would have everything— every flower, every tree— or he could fly to the moon. This seemed possible and Waiyaki raised up his eyes to the sky. His heart bled for her. But he could not run. And he could not fly.⁷

Ngugi tries to show that woman is not a submissive being and can strongly oppose and stand against oppression and subjugation. He presents his female characters as strong women who can bring

about change in family and social lives. Ngugi shows that woman can make her own decision. For example, Nyambura as an assertive and decisive woman finally decides to be with Waiyaki and rebels against her father. In front of her father, she tells Waiyaki that she loves him without caring to Joshua's threat.

Nyambura, uncircumcised and Muthoni, circumcised become the victims of the Christian missionaries and the Kenyans traditions. Nyambura finally rebels against her father and breaks her relationship with him and goes to Waiyaki, who is non-Christian and a circumcised boy, consequently, her father disowns her. But Nyambura cannot stand against the will of the society because the community does not let Waiyaki marry an uncircumcised girl. Nyambura and Waiyaki are brought

before the public on the charge by Kiama, a group of traditionalists which is formed to ensure the purity of the tribe, that a circumcised boy wants to marry an uncircumcised girl. Muthoni dies due to the circumcision which is one of the important Kenyan traditions. Even, Kabonyi, the opponent of Waiyaki, says 'Muthoni died because she was visited by evil spirits'.⁸ Ngugi shows that in both the cases, it may be a traditional or untraditional, woman is the victim.

Thus, through the novel, *The River Between*, Ngugi shows the significance role of women in their society who desire to be independent and fight against male-domination and colonialism. Ngugi portrays his female characters as courageous and brave who are ready to take high risk and die for their cause.

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