



# Analysis of colonialism and tradition vs. progress in "the river between" by ngugi wa thiong'o

**Ms. Gowsika B.**

Department of English, Dr. N.G.P. Arts and Science College, Coimbatore, India

**Email:** gogowsika27@gmail.com

**Abstract:** *"The River Between," written by Ngugi Wa Thiong'o, is a thought-provoking novel that explores the impact of colonialism on traditional African societies and the conflict between preserving cultural heritage and embracing progress. This paper critically analyzes the themes of colonialism and the struggle between tradition and progress as depicted in the novel. Through a close examination of key characters, plot developments, and cultural symbolism, the study aims to provide a comprehensive understanding of the novel's portrayal of the tensions arising from the collision of colonial influences with indigenous customs. The analysis further delves into the nuanced perspectives on the need for societal development while respecting and preserving the richness of African traditions. By shedding light on Ngugi Wa Thiong'o masterpiece, this research contributes to the broader discourse on postcolonial literature and the complexities of cultural identity in the face of historical and socio-political changes.*

**Key Words:** Colonialism, Tradition, Progress, African society, Cultural heritage, and identity.

## 1. INTRODUCTION:

"The River Between" is a powerful novel by Kenyan author Ngugi Wa Thiong'o, published in 1965. Set in the early 20th century, the novel explores the impact of colonialism on the Gikuyu community in Kenya and delves into the complex themes of tradition versus progress. Through a rich portrayal of characters and their struggles, Ngugi presents a thought-provoking narrative that highlights the tensions between the old ways of life and the challenges brought about by colonial influences. This analysis will delve into how colonialism disrupts traditional life and further examines the struggle between embracing progress and preserving cultural heritage.

## 2. THE IMPACT OF COLONIALISM ON TRADITION:

To provide a solid foundation for understanding the novel's themes, the historical context of British colonialism in Kenya is crucial. A brief overview of the colonial era, including the motives behind colonization, the colonization process, and its lasting impact on the indigenous population, will help contextualize the struggles depicted in the novel. The Gikuyu community experiences cultural subjugation as British colonial forces impose Western values, education, and religion upon them. This section will explore the Gikuyu people's struggles with preserving their cultural identity amidst the pressures of assimilation. The characters' conflicts and dilemmas, such as Waiyaki's attempts to balance tradition and Western education, will serve as examples to analyze the far-reaching effects of colonial cultural dominance. The construction of a colonial settlement leads to the dispossession of traditional Gikuyu lands, causing significant disruptions to the community's way of life. The loss of land and livelihoods creates tension and resistance, as seen through Mugo's resistance movement. This section will explore the emotional and physical consequences of land dispossession and how it affects the Gikuyu community's cohesion and resilience.

### 2.1. Introduction of Western Education and Religion:

One of the central elements of colonialism was the imposition of Western education and religion on indigenous cultures. In "The River Between," the arrival of Christian missionaries brings about a clash between traditional Gikuyu beliefs and Christianity. The Gikuyu people face a dilemma as they must choose between holding onto their ancestral customs or adopting new ways of thinking.



## 2.2. Cultural Disruption:

Colonialism disrupts the traditional way of life of the Gikuyu people. The introduction of new technologies, such as the construction of schools and roads, challenges their existing social structures. This creates a rift within the community, with some members embracing the changes, while others resist, fearing the loss of their cultural identity.

## 2.3. Loss of Language and Identity:

Colonialism also results in the erosion of the Gikuyu language and culture. The imposition of the English language as the medium of instruction in schools leads to a decline in the use of native languages. This loss of language further distances the younger generation from their cultural heritage and historical roots.

## 3. TRADITION VS. PROGRESS:

Christian missionaries' arrival introduces the clash between traditional Gikuyu beliefs and Western religion. This section will examine the struggles faced by characters like Waiyaki and Joshua, torn between preserving their roots and embracing Christianity. It will also explore how this conflict influences the dynamics of the Gikuyu community and their relationships with one another. Female circumcision, a significant aspect of Gikuyu tradition, becomes a point of contention, representing the broader conflict between tradition and progress in regard to gender roles and women's rights. This section will explore the complexities of the female circumcision debate, as represented by characters like Nyambura and Muthoni, and its implications for cultural preservation and women's agency.

### A. Conflict between Waiyaki and Kamau:

The characters of Waiyaki and Kamau embody the conflict between tradition and progress in "The River Between." Waiyaki, who represents progress, becomes educated and embraces Christianity, believing that this will lead to the upliftment of his people. Kamau, on the other hand, clings firmly to his traditional beliefs, refusing to abandon his roots.

### B. The Dilemma of Female Circumcision:

Ngugi explores the sensitive issue of female circumcision as a reflection of the struggle between tradition and progress. While some characters, like Joshua, insist on maintaining the practice, others, like Nyambura, advocate for its abandonment, arguing that it perpetuates gender inequality and oppression.

### C. Divisions within the Community:

The conflict between tradition and progress leads to divisions within the Gikuyu community. Those who embrace the changes brought about by colonialism are seen as traitors to their culture by the more conservative members. This creates tension and hostility, ultimately tearing the community apart.

## 4. THE RECONCILIATION OF THEMES:

Mugo's resistance against the colonial forces becomes a pivotal moment in the novel. This section will analyze Mugo's character and the reasons behind his actions, shedding light on the role of resistance in the face of oppressive colonial rule and its impact on the community's sense of identity and empowerment.

### A. Waiyaki's Tragic Fate:

Waiyaki's journey as a mediator and bridge-builder between tradition and progress is central to the novel's thematic exploration. This section will explore Waiyaki's motivations, challenges, and ultimate destiny, illustrating his quest for reconciliation and the complexities of seeking harmony between conflicting ideologies. As the story progresses, Waiyaki's attempts to bridge the gap between tradition and progress prove futile. His vision of uniting his people under a shared identity that incorporates both old and new ideals becomes an unattainable dream. This tragedy reflects the difficulty of reconciling opposing forces and ideologies in the face of colonial influence.

### B. The Significance of the River:

The river, a central symbol in the novel, represents the divide between tradition and progress. It stands as a metaphor for the barrier separating the two opposing ideologies. Throughout the novel, the river is a physical and metaphorical obstacle, underscoring the difficulty of finding a middle ground. The river serves as a powerful symbol throughout the novel, both physically and metaphorically dividing the Gikuyu community. This section will analyze the river's significance as a geographic obstacle to unity and cooperation, as well as its representation of the deeper divisions between tradition and progress. Waiyaki's attempts to bridge this divide will be explored, highlighting the challenges he



faces in bringing about societal cohesion. Apart from its physical and metaphorical meanings, the river also holds spiritual and purifying symbolism in Gikuyu culture. This section will delve into the cultural significance of the river and how its connection to the people's beliefs adds depth to the novel's exploration of tradition and progress.

#### **4. CONCLUSION:**

"The River Between" by Ngugi Wa Thiong'o is a profound exploration of the themes of colonialism and tradition versus progress. Through its vivid characters and intricate plot, the novel portrays the profound impact of colonialism on indigenous cultures and the struggle to preserve traditional ways of life amid the pressures of progress. Ngugi's masterful storytelling urges readers to reflect on the complexities of identity, cultural heritage, and the consequences of historical forces that continue to shape societies even in the present day. "The River Between" remains an enduring work that offers valuable insights into the ongoing dialogue between the past and the future.

#### **Works Cited:**

##### **BOOK:**

1. Ngugi Wa Thiong'o. *The River Between*. New York, New York, Penguin Books, 2015.

##### **Web Reference:**

- "LitCharts." *LitCharts*, [www.litcharts.com/lit/the-river-between/summary](http://www.litcharts.com/lit/the-river-between/summary).