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The Cross and the Crown: Missionary Christianity, Spiritual Colonization, and Imperial Hegemony in Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o's *The River Between*

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Abstract

Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o's The River Between (1965) illustrates the ideological warfare imposed on the Gikuyu community through the combined mechanism of Christian missionary and British colonial rule, underscoring an (un)holy nexus between cross and crown, in which, spiritual conversion operates not as an innocuous offer of salvation but as a calculated device of political subjugation. This paper argues that the rift between the opposing villages of Kameno and Makuyu demonstrates African psyche in microcosm that is fractured through missionary Christianity and is dismantled by the schism it produces. The spiritual disruption caused by the advent of new faith is inseparable from the empire it serves. Waiyaki's tragic attempt to reconcile the two ridges with their differing faiths provides a possibility of syncretism that is bound to fail, and the death of Waiyaki and Muthoni evinces the human cost of spiritual colonization. Ngũgĩ represents Christianity and imperial authority not as parallel but mutually reinforcing forces, since the Cross provides a moral framework for hegemony to the empire and the Crown offers institutional power to sustain the church.

Keywords: *Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o; The River Between; imperial authority; spiritual colonization; fractured identity..*

Introduction

European colonization and Western expansionism began as a trading voyage across the world, and as an integral part of it, Christianity began to spread through various missionary and church institutions. Absorbed by the holy venture of spreading the true words of God, colonizers brought the Bible with them so that the natives could know about the true faith, thus saving their souls from eternal damnation. While the first object of the missionaries was to win over, to borrow Lord Rosebery's (in)famous phrase, "human and not wholly human" with social activities like the establishment of mission schools and churches, conversion to the Christian faith had always been one of the primary motives for them. However, apart from the grand proselytizing mission, Christianity served the Empire's needs and the Empire served Christianity in return, since there existed an (un)holy nexus between them. Therefore, faith facilitated the political hegemony of the imperial authority through spiritual colonization under the guise of sermon, and the sword worked alongside the cross in the expansion and dissemination of Western Christianity, undermining the indigenous culture, dismantling the existing socio-political fabric, and destablizing the power structure.

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The River Between extensively portrays the aftermath of Christianity's contact with the native faith of the local Gikuyu community and Ngũgĩ, despite being an avowed Christian at the time of writing this novel and an admirer of the Bible, rejects the religious tenets of Christianity by accepting an ideology that is Marxist in nature and revolutionary in theme by changing his name from Christian-fashioned James Ngũgĩ to a more native-sounding Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o. Set in the backdrop of British Imperialism in early 1930s, this novel depicts two opposing ridges of Kameno and Makuyu in Kenyan heartland: while the former desperately clings on to the long-pervaded credence and traditions, the latter embraces the new way of life. Ngũgĩ considers this new faith and its cultural manifestation as the "biggest weapon" and vanguard of spiritual colonization and compares it with "cultural bomb" that seeks

> to annihilate a people's belief in their names, in their languages, in their environment, in their heritage of struggle, in their unity, in their capacities and ultimately in themselves… The intended results are despair, despondency and collective death-wish. Amidst the wasteland which it has created, imperialism presents itself as the cure and demands that the dependant sing hymns of praise with the constant refrain: 'Theft is Holy'" (Ngũgĩ 03).

Ngũgĩ's second published novel, *The River Between* probes into the cultural tension stemming from the colonial intrusion and infusion, focusing most specifically on the question of female circumcision and how female bodies become the site for dominance and hegemony in colonial social fabric. Since this is a central practice in native Gikuyu community—a mean of selfhood and and expression of courage—all natives must go through this ordeal because "[t]he concept of the ritual purity of the tribe remains alive" (Cook and Okenimpke 29) even after the advent of colonial faith. However, the clash between the new and the old, the native and the foreign becomes imminent since religious conversion becomes interwoven into the pervading questions of hegemony, authority, cultural autonomy and belonging. Even the title of the novel itself suggests a kind of metaphoric relation between cross and crown: as the river shapes and even dictates the surrounding landscapes, the ideological forces, both indigenous and imperial, reshapes the societal structure. Therefore, *The River Between* unfolds how the spiritual colonization serves the imperial authority, and to what extent it functions as an indispensable tool for colonial expansionism and hegemony. The rivers of faith facilitates the currents of empire, cloaked in the language of sacred mask that every good Christian must earnestly follow and whole-heartedly adhere to.

Sacred Masks, Imperial Agendas

Absorbed by the religious euphoria and holy venture of spreading the true words of God, the missionary enterprise arrived into African soil during the 16th and 17th centuries with

colonial forces not just an instrument of conquest but with a conclusive vocabulary of salvation, enlightenment and superior faith. This is exactly what Ngũgĩ's portryal of Christianity captures in this novel: the church brings a new faith that is irreconcilable to the native century-long customs, and it sets in motion the native community into division and disunity by inculcating foreign ideologies through church, educational institutions and hospitals. Therefore, the "Cross" in this novel functions as a kind of sacred mask that unmistakably aids the imperial agenda in the name of religion, underscoring the inherent relation between cross and cross, in which, both cooperate in tandem to erase the collective consciousness of the colonized and to unleash, what Spivak calls, "epistemic violence" (21-78).

In The River Between, Joshua is the perfect embodiment of this sacred mask that serves the imperial agendas, since it deeply entangles in his psyche that Christianity and Civilization are the same thing, and thus silently accepting what Ngũgĩ calls "cultural bombs". Though he belongs to the native land, he becomes, after accepting new faith, the most violent critic of his community, denouncing the century-old customs, clan structures, and practices that once represented his own identity. One thing should be noted here that Joshua does not simply accept new faith; rather his new credence requires him to consider his former religion and customs as backward, degrading and even as evil. The new faith has conquered him wholly and since then he has "renounced his tribe's magic, power and ritual. He turned to and felt the deep presence of the one God. Had he not given the white man power over all?" (Ngũgĩ 28). Adding Christian belief means extinction of his former self as he is told that the two faiths cannot be compatible together, for "his people worshipped Murungu, Mwenenyaga, Ngai. The unerring white man had called the Gikuyu god the prince of darkness" (28). Therefore, it is not surprising that becoming full Christian means denouncing the old ways of life, accepting the European code of conduct and ensuring the erasure of indigenous practices as noted by Ngũgĩ in Homecoming:

> …the Church of Scotland Mission, which has a highly strict Puritan tradition, could not separate the strictly Christian dogma or doctrine from the European scale of values, and from European customs. The evidence that you were saved was not whether you were a believer in and follower of Christ, and accepted all men as equal: the measure of your Christian love and charity was in preserving the outer signs and symbols of a European way of life; whether you dressed as Europeans did, whether you had acquired European good manners, liked European hymns and tunes, and of course whether you had refused to have your daughter circumcised (31-32).

Joshua has embraced this religious conviction because he is spiritually colonized and his conversion is undeniably inseparable from the colonial project he is a product of, for which, he willingly obeys, and in cases, serves the Empire's needs. Ngũgĩ condemns such complete and absolute conversion as expressed in *Weep Not, Child*: "A white man is a white man. But a black man trying to be a white man is bad and harsh" (14). His religious belief converges with the imperial forces since he believed that "it was his duty as a Christian to obey the Government, giving unto Caesar the things that are Caesar's and to God the things that are God's" (31). Religious authorities would often cite verses from the Bible in sermons and congregations to pacify the masses to obey the colonial rules as is the duty of every good Christian. They would often preach: "[t]herefore whoever resists the authority resists the ordinance of God, and those who resist will bring judgment on themselves… For he is God's minister to you for good. But if you do evil, be afraid; for he does not bear the sword in vain; for he is God's minister, an avenger to execute wrath on him who practices evil" (Scofield et al. 1569).

Gramsci's concept of hegemony exposes how colonial forces operate beyond the direct coercive methods through cultural and theological apparatuses since hegemony is the "spontaneous" consent given by the natives to the "general direction imposed on social life by the dominant fundamental group" (12). In Achebe's Things Fall Apart, the advent of missionary activities can be considered as a part of hegemonic process: rather than extensively relying on armed forces, colonialism gradually introduces a new faith, a new cultural alternative that undermines and challenges the epistemological and moral authority of Igbo religious traditions, thus enabling colonial ideology to be the dominant force. This hegemony comes through what Gramsci calls the combination of "force and consent" where the sword facilitates to wipe out resistance and the cross facilitates spiritual colonization by sowing the seeds of division. The "white religion", as Achebe calls it in the novel, acts as a force of separation that undermines the native unity, and as a result, they can "no longer act like one" and they "have fallen apart" (157).

In *Weep Not, Child*, Ngũgĩ reveals how Christianity functions not only as a religious system but as a cultural extension of imperial authority by associating European values with the notion of progress and civilization. The ideological contradiction of colonial Christianity is also exposed in the novel since the preaching of universal brotherhood often finds itself grounded under racial hierarchy and unequal power. Joshua and his followers' conversion to Christianity in *The River Between* unravels how the new faith tries to establish hegemony not only through any direct means but also through indoctrination of the masses that occurs, as Rob Nixon puts it in a different context, "gradually and out of sight" (2). The process is slow

yet progressive as expressed by Kinuthia, "the men of God came peacefully. They were given a place. Now see what has happened. They have invited their brothers to come and take all the land. Our country is invaded" (Achebe 62).

The controversy regarding female circumcision in *The River Between* also sheds light on the pervading impact of Christianity that not only seeks to dismantle the practice but also tries to criminalize it, though it "was an important ritual to the tribe. It kept people together, bound the tribe. It was at the core of the social structure, and a something that gave meaning to a man's life" (Ngũgĩ 66). For the natives, it was more than a ceremony because, in Kenyatta's words, "it admits a boy or girl to the full membership of the community" (107) and those who do not go through the ritual are simply "detribalized". Though it was a central rite to the tribe, the new faith cannot accommodate the custom, and converts like Joshua, though circumcised himself and married to a circumcised wife, consider it as somewhat dark and deflecting from the way to God. For the natives, circumcision rites "are rites of communal revitalization, identity, solidarity and reaffirmation of the sacred bond with the land" (Ogundele 119); but for the colonizers and converts alike, it was an "unforgivable sin" and those who support this act are no longer admitted into colonial backed missionary schools. It suggests how missionary schools demanded complete submission to their customs and convictions, foregrounding a spiritual as well as political colonization over Gikuyu community and framing the natives as less developed human species to which "well-wishers" like Kipling (un)lovingly calls "half-devil half-child" (lines 7–8). Kenyatta criticised the inherent mindset of Imperial forces that dictates the personal lives of the natives, telling them what to like and what to hate:

> The missionaries who attack the irua of girls are more to be pitied than condemned, for most of their information is derived from Gikuyu converts who have been taught by these same Christians to regard the custom of female circumcision as something savage, and barbaric, worthy only of heathens who live in perpetual sin under the influence of the Devil… Even the few scientifically minded ones are themselves so obsessed with prejudice against the custom that their objectivity is blurred in trying to unravel the mystery of the irua (153-154).

Furthermore, Muthoni's death in the novel is the direct result of collision between the existing and thenew faith because she is trapped and doubly marginalized by the patriarchal structure and the religious subjugation. As the daughter of Joshua, she must internalize the moral order set by Christianity as demanded by her father, and on the other hand, she, as a woman of the tribe, must accept the long-pervading customs that would make her acceptable to the tribal code of life. She represents a syncretic optimism in the novel as she stands in the middle ground between, to borrow Fanon's term, "a world cut in two" (38), suggesting a possibility

of reconciliation, bridging the gaps and mending the rifts, where two opposite creeds can co-exist in close proximity "to hollow out a new space of identity between colonial Christianity and Gikuyu tradition, to differentiate culture from colonialism and Christianity from Eurocentrism" (Gikandi 22). Her willing circumcision becomes a matter of debate and controversy in the novel, and she pays the price for her audacity in death, exasperating the existing rivalry between Kameno and Makuyu.

What should be noted here is that her father Joshua does not feel sorry for her death since he considers Muthoni as an outcast sent by the devil to test his faith. He is spiritually colonized in such a manner that even the death of her own daughter does not unnerve him for a moment and he vows to adhere to the new religion more strictly than before by accepting its moral framework without question. This total submission to missionary dogmatism and imperial authority and complete rejection to tribal practices represents spiritual hollowness that Ngũgĩ condemns. Ngũgĩ depicts the shaky position of such shallow belief through the description of Joshua's house that mirrors his internal condition: "Joshua's house was different. His was a tin-roofed rectangular building standing quite distinctly by itself on the ridge. The tin roof was already decaying and let in rain freely, so on top of the roof could be seen little scraps of sacking that covered the very bad parts" (18).

Interestingly enough, the architecture of his house echoes the Biblical parable of the foolish builder who built his house on the sand. It metaphorically mirrors the idea that a person who builds his identity on a fragile foundation will collapse with the eventual advent of powerful forces like colonialism. Joshua often notes the contradictory teachings of his new dogma yet dares not to question the "God-inspired assertions of the White man. After all, the white man had brought Christ into the country" (96). Joshua has internalized Christian belief in such a manner that he even renounces his own daughter, considering anything other than his faith as obstacles instead of treating them as alternatives. Therefore, it is evident that the sacred mask with its holy mission, and the mechanism of imperial authority with its armed forces are not separate entities; rather they are the two faces of a single intertwined colonial enterprise that seek to demolish and dismantle prevailing power structures to establish what Gramsci calls "hegemony". The Cross provides a moral framework for hegemony to the empire and the Crown offers institutional power to sustain the church, thus one lending the other required legitimacy that it cannot accomplish alone. Therefore, both Cross and Crown form an (un)godly entanglement that works in tandem under the sincere language of salvation and enlightenment, providing a moral and hegemonic positions for the British. So under the guise of sacred masks, the new faith actually serves the imperial agendas and vice

versa, underscoring an (un)holy nexus between the two, in which both sustain and aid the other.

Fractured Identity and Limits of Reconciliation

In The River Between, Waiyaki has been presented as a heroic figure who transcends the schism of colonial spiritualization and turns into a man of fractured identity and divided consciousness, and the tragedy of the novel lies in exposing why the transcendence fails to provide any plausible solution against the new reality. When Honia river divides the ridges of Kameno and Makuyu, the new faith brings cultural and psychological division into a coherent, if not unblemished, way of life. Waiyaki stands in between the rupture, embodying the white man's education while simultaneously showing loyalty to the tribe—thus forming a fractured identity to what Bhabha terms as "third space" (55). The colonial education system in Siriana Mission School inculcates in Waiyaki a belief that "the white man's education was an instrument of enlightenment and advance" (116). He is inspired by his father who envisions a mythical heroic figure in his son rooted in ancient prophecy and therefore urges him to "Learn all the wisdom and all the secrets of the white man. But do not follow his vices. Be true to your people and the ancient rites" (116).

Waiyaki also believes that by spreading knowledge and education, he can resist the encroachment of colonial forces and enlighten the natives; therefore he enters into the educational system and fails to grasp, as Amilcar Cabral calls it, "colonial miseducation" (7). Similarly in *Weep Not, Child*, the protagonist Njoroge's father Ngotho believes that missionary education which he terms "white man's magic", is a treasure that would help to drive the colonizers from the Kenya and would create better job opportunities for the natives. Ngũgĩ comments in Homecoming how this missionary project of Western education would inculcate an ideology that would produce colonial surrogate: "As education later came to be the ladder to better jobs and money and to a higher standard of living, albeit in the image of the European mode of life, the Christian-educated African became even more removed from his ancestral shrines and roots" (32). Though Church education, for Njoroge and for Waiyaki, holds the treasure for the future, it ultimately raises a fundamental question: 'how can colonial apparatus and church education resist colonialism itself?'—to which Ngũgĩ provides no direct answer.

The necessity to acquire colonial education to resist imperial authority puts both protagonists of both novels into a paradoxical predicament between two incompatible worlds, in which they are to master a foreign moral framework that is designed to decimate the very culture they want to protect. Waiyaki is a trapped figure between the natives and the imperialists

who, "impregnated with the magic of the white man, would infuse the tribe with wisdom and strength, giving it a new life" (88). He believes, similar to Muthoni's idiosyncratic view, that reconciliation is possible between the two faiths, and by bridging the gulf, he would be the middleman—the instrument of peace. Waiyaki's fragmented identity loves both the missionary teachings and religious tenets of his native land: "…he himself loved some Christian teachings. The element of love and sacrifice agreed with his own temperament. The suffering of Christ in the Garden of Gethsemane and His agony on the tree has always moved him. But he did not want to betray the tribe" (97). Waiyaki's infatuation with Christ's sacrifice mirrors the life of Ngũgĩ himself, for he went to mission schools and all his fictional works are imbued with Biblical allusions and Christian moral teachings.

Waiyaki's father often warns him not to accept the ways of the white man, though he is confused and would sometimes wonder: "was the education he was trying to spread in the ridges not a contamination?" (70). The profound conflict at the core of Waiyaki's identity insulates him from both the old world he belongs from and the new world he tries to incorporate, suggesting a profound vulnerable position that is often romanticized in postcolonial narratives. His school project emphasizes his desperate attempt to synthesize his own divided persona because Western-style education places him, in Brendon Nicholls' words, "in a position of emasculated complicity with the colonizing powers" (26). One thing should be noted here that he is not simply choosing between tradition and modernity in any neutral sense, because the modernity as presented through Western education has established hegemony and the traditional collective values are waning under this onslaught. Therefore, Waiyaki is forced to pick a "third space," in which, he preaches Europeanized education to decolonize and resist the invading forces.

He is suspended between western hegemony and native resistance, for his church education leaves his mindset infiltrated with colonial ideology. James Ogude captures his Faustian dilemma: "Part of this project involves an attempt to escape or free himself from the 'ritual demand of the tribe, while another part entails an endeavour to try and modernise the 'tribe' through education" (18). This dilemma cannot be sorted since it is a blurry vision from his part and the conflict is a deeply rooted one that cannot be resolved through education alone, since "the ills of colonialism cannot be treated with the tools of colonialism" (Iweala xviii). The fractured identity of Waiyaki and his divided faiths cannot provide resistance and freedom: a political solution is required. Though everyone from the ridge considered him as leader, he has inherent doubts that cannot be resolved easily as encapsulated by Ngũgĩ's narrative:

> They called him a saviour. His own father had talked of a Messiah to come. 64 Whom was the Messiah coming to save? From what? And where would He lead the people? Although Waiyaki did not stop to get clear answers to these questions, he increasingly saw himself as the one who would lead the tribe to the light. Education was the light of the country. That was what the people wanted. Education. Schools. Education (98).

The fracture is not limited to Waiyaki alone; rather it extends beyond him, reaching the individual and collective alike, most notably in the increasing rigidity of the Kiama. What has been formed as a group to resist colonial intrusion and infiltration of new faith, exceedingly excludes its own populace through suspicion and policing, ironically mirroring the missionary they oppose. Kabonyi's role in showcasing rigidity is noteworthy here: his personal hatred toward Waiyaki and his ideological stand force him to seek purity of the tribe and whoever fails to do so and shows any proximity to colonial framework, must be punished. The tragedy of Waiyaki's death at the hand of his own people who deemed him leader once, is significant because it demonstrates two-layered fractures: colonialism fractures a deepening divide between the two ridges, and the resistant movement creates another fracture within the community along the axis of loyalist versus traitor, leaving figures like Waiyaki in a vulnerable, ambiguous position.

The story of Muthoni offers another significant yet fragile parallel for fractured identity and resistance that centers round gender consciousness and bodily autonomy. Since she is Joshua's daughter, she must conform to the faith his father intensely follows; and she also wants to be a woman of the tribe from which she belongs. Therefore, she is stuck between the two fractured selves and her vision is an idealistic "form of a tragic romance" (29), as Apollo Obonyo Amoko terms it, rather than practical. Amidst the ongoing crises between the Christianity that serves the Empire and the tribal custom that binds the natives together, it is not possible to find a possible middle ground to resolve the conflict or provide a syncretic identity without paying some price. Her brave yet tragic decision to undergo circumcision echoes her will and self-determination under a pervasive patriarchal structure, both colonial and native, that seeks to assert its own authority and dominance. The death of Muthoni brings forth one of the bleakest ironies of the novel: one who tries to envision reconciliation is wrecked by the very opposing forces she wanted to bridge. Her death exemplifies how the encroachment of colonialism forces one to choose between impossible choices, shattering the possibility of reconciliation and peaceful settlements.

Nymabura, Muthoni's sister, represents another form of resistance: fractured belonging and the limits of reconciliation. She feels suffocated by the missionary zeal of her father and she questions the faith to assert her own identity and feelings. She is drawn to Waiyaki in the

novel, for he possesses a possibility of synthesis, a glimpse of hope that is otherwise suppressed in her. On the opposite frame, Joshua has accepted the rivers of faith that serve the currents of empire unquestionably and his acceptance is so complete that he even disregards his own daughters. Nyambura, however, rejects the Christian dogma at the end, especially what Joshua believes and promulgates, for she has her own vision of unity and reconciliation:

> A religion of love and forgiveness stood between them. No! It could never be a religion of love. Never, never. The religion of love was in the heart. The other was Joshua's own religion, which ran counter to her spirit and violated love. If the faith of Joshua and Livingstone came to separate, why, it was not good. If it came to stand between a father and his daughter so that her death did not move him, then it was inhuman. She wanted the other. The other that held together, the other that united (131).

Ngũgĩ's achievement lies in his vivid depiction of a community that no longer can act like one, since it is divided by the new faith that spiritually colonized the native, fragmenting the possible ground for solidarity and resistance. Nyambura's fate lies in her rejection to be colonized by a faith that comes from foreign land and her negation to a tribal life that demands complete loyalty. She remains the hybrid figure residing in between that must resist both patriarchal structures competing for control over her body and her choice. Her death remains as a function of condemnation against the rigidity of the two faiths that remain exclusive to one another, leaving no room for synthesis and reconciliation.

Ngũgĩ's vision of reconciliation is stated in the very depiction of the river itself as it serves as a symbol of possibility. Unlike the rival ridges, "the river between" stands fixed, connecting the opposites, suggesting a mutual cooperation and shared sense of unity. However, it is not possible reconcile unless, as Chinwezu puts it, "[e]urocentric version of history that at best ignored but more often condemned pre-conquest Africa, and indoctrinated into the view that Europe was civilization and Africa barbarism" (85), is dismantled. Ngũgĩ's vision in this regard is neither utopian nor despairing; it is thoroughly conditional. Reconciliation between the Cross and the ridges—between imported authority and indigenous life—remains possible in principle, but only after the underlying structures of spiritual and imperial hegemony that rendered Waiyaki's synthesis impossible have been demolished rather than merely bridged. Christianity with its teaching of compassion, love and salvation can also coexist with the native faith if it does not become a tool for spiritual colonization and if the (un)holy nexus between Cross and Crown is dismantled once and for all.

Conclusion

The River Between shed critical insights into the spiritual colonization enacted not by the soldiers but by the religious authority that served as both precursor and partner for imperial hegemony. The novel's depiction of geography—two opposing ridges separated by the sacred Honia river and bound by shared ancestry—probes into a deep spatial allegory for the native community divided not by natural entities but by an imported theological schism, a byproduct of colonialism. The absolute conversion of Joshua and the opportunistic manipulation of Kabonyi denote the same crisis in different forms: the fragmentation of an inclusive and holistic worldview that brought the spiritual and the political dimensions as coherent whole. Waiyaki's failure to reconcile between confronting ridges is not a personal failure but an outcome of a structure that is designed to prevent synthesis. The missionary preaching of absolute submission and colonial encroachment towards land are two apparatuses of a single expression of Imperialism, each legitimizing the other while also undermining the Gikuyu community's unity and capacity for self-determination. Ngũgĩ's narrative in this novel stands as an early testament of collaboration between cross and crown, in which the former serves the latter not as an incidental force but as an enduring instrument.

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