

# Relevance of Nature in Ngugi wa Thiong'o's the River Between: An Ecocritical Perspective.

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## Abstract:

In all his writings Ngugi wa Thiong'o focused on the historical aspects of the African continent particularly Kenya. Through his writings, he always tried to reestablish the notions and beliefs which have been misinterpreted by Western writers and thinkers about the African continent and its people. Ngugi's motif was to make the entire world aware of the rich culture, tradition, religion, myths, customs, and social norms of African people. African continent has been blessed with the prosperity of natural resources. Vast landscapes, waterfalls, rivers, dense forests, and deserts are abundantly found in Africa. In the novels of Ngugi nature has significant relevance where characters of his novels establish harmony with nature. The characters of Ngugi mostly belong to tribal and rural areas where their lives are deeply engrossed with nature. The novel *The River Between* has an echo of an eco-critical phenomenon where multitudes of ecocritical aspects can be explored. The title itself indicates the importance of rivers in the novel. In this novel, the relationship between characters of novels with the ridges, valleys, landscapes, forests, and rivers is highly profound and helpful for Ngugi to develop the motif of the novel. The paper will explore the impact of nature on the Kenyan people and how the myths and social norms of Kenyan people are associated with nature. The paper will also seek the impact of colonization on the natural resources of Kenya. The paper will examine this novel and Ngugi wa Thiong'o as a writer from the perspective of Eco-consciousness.

**Keywords:** Nature, Decolonisation, Eco-criticism, Land, Kenya.

## Introduction

The entire human race is heavily dependent on nature and its resources. We are consuming natural resources incessantly without realizing that our consumption is damaging these natural resources badly. Due to the continually increasing population of the human race day by day, these natural resources have been drastically exploited. The attention towards this matter was initiated in the eighteenth century and this study was later named Ecocriticism. Eco is a part of biology, which is connected to the relationship between living beings and their compatibility with those living conditions. Ecocriticism generally talks about the numerous ideas and the relations between humans and social constructs from the different aspects which are exercised in literature. Ecocriticism is a literary and cultural revolution that critically examines literary texts and their relationships with nature. Ecocriticism is a movement of study that perceives, "an earth centered approach to the study of texts" (Gerrard, 1). All the criticism that hovers around ecology is, "share the fundamental premise that human culture is connected to the physical world, affecting it and affected by it" and as "a critical stance, it has one foot in literature and other on land" (Glottfelty xix). After the emergence of the Industrial Revolution, there have been many challenges faced by

nature and environment of pollution and unrepeatably degradable degradation of natural resources. This concern had forced some thinkers and environmentalists to think over the conservation and the utility of environment. Hence, the thinkers and intellectuals pondered over bringing any movement or campaign to save nature from human disaster through the mediums of literature and other artistic ways.

Famous Ecocritical thinker Cheryll Glotfelty has given the definition of Ecocriticism that, "Ecocriticism is the study of the relationship between literature and physical environment" (xviii). So, Ecocriticism lay down how literature and its activities form current notions of environment and nature associated with cultural atmosphere. American literary critic Lawrence Buell explains, "ecocriticism as a study of a relationship between literature and the environment conducted in a spirit of commitment to environmentalist praxis" (1995, 430). Famous Indian critic and scholar Pramod K. Nayar observes Ecocriticism that, "Eco-criticism is a critical mode that looks at the representation of and landscape in cultural texts, paying particular attention to attitudes towards 'nature' and rhetoric employed when speaking about it. It aligns itself with ecological activism and social theory with the assumptions that the rhetoric of cultural texts reflects and informs material practices towards the environment while seeking to increase awareness about it and linking itself (and literary texts) with other ecological sciences and approaches" (242). Although the study of ecocriticism has still not got the consolidated framework because, "the movement still does not have a widely-known set of assumptions, doctrines or procedures" (Barry, 238). From the start green criticism came through the numerous different and inaptitude approaches to the environment. A well-known eco-critic Greg Garrard defines four different viewpoints of this study: (i) The "discursive construction" foregrounds the extent to which the very distinction of nature and culture is itself dependent on specific cultural values; (ii) The "aesthetic construction" places value on nature for its beauty, complexity, or wildness; (iii) The "political construction" emphasizes the power interests that inform any valuation or devaluation of nature; and finally; and iv) The "scientific construction," aims at the description of the functioning of natural systems. (2004:89)

## Discussion

As a writer Ngugi wa Thiong'o has the motive to make sure a chronology of historical occurrences of Kenya from the beginning contrary to the circumcision of women in the earlier twentieth century. He also stressed the 'displacement' of Kenyan people and dreamt of getting replaced on their respective lands from which natives had been deprived by British colonizers. This novel *The River Between* belongs to the earlier phase of writings of Ngugi where he intentionally introduced historical events and important figures which helped Kenya to get independence from British colonizers. Kenya got independence in 1963 and this novel was published in 1965. Mau-Mau Uprising of the 1950s, Dedan Kimathi who was the chief leader of this uprising, and Jomo Kenyatta who was an anti-colonial activist and later became president of Kenya have been given an important place in the earlier novels of Ngugi. The depiction of these historical figures and their contributions, patriotism, and sometimes betrayal helped Ngugi to establish his purpose to make aware of Kenyan people about the struggles and challenges faced for freedom of the country.

Every colonized writer took writing as a tool to liberate their people physically, mentally, and psychologically. Frantz Fanon adheres to this concept as, "the colonized man who writes for its people ought to use past with the intention of opening the future, as an invitation to action and basis for hope" (232). Ngugi in one of the essays clarifies his objective to write this novel, in the words of Ngugi, "It was Africa explaining itself, speaking for itself and interpreting its past. It was an Africa rejecting the

images of its past as drawn by artists of imperialism” (1993, 79). Ngugi in his writing followed the footprints of Chinua Achebe who had been regarded as a pioneer and torchbearer of colonized writings, whose magnum opus *Things Fall Apart* inspired numerous works of the Third World writings. Chinua Achebe’s, “the goals in writing *Things Fall Apart* was to correct a whole history of misinterpretations of his people and country in occidental discourse” (Alam, 2011). The African writers have established a metaphysical relationship between a true artist and his people and society. In Ngugi’s writings, the importance of land and its relation with the people of Kenya has been considered as an epitome of the Kenyan people’s existence. This strong relation of the land with the people of Kenya has been taken primarily by Ngugi when he asserts, “the land question is the basic to an understanding of Kenya’s history and contemporary politics, as indeed it is of twentieth-century history wherever people have had their land taken away by conquest, unequal treaties or by genocides of part of the population” (44, 2007). In fact, the movements like Mau-Mau uprising and violent struggles were originally intended to bring back the lands which have been forcefully usurped by colonizers. As Ngugi says, “The Mau-Mau militant organization which spearheaded the armed struggle for Kenya’s struggle for Kenya’s independence was officially called the Kenya Land and Freedom Army” (44, 2007). In African writings, the tradition of folk stories has a great influence. In these folk stories nature has been highly glorified like rivers, mountains, ridges, valleys, and forests have an immemorial importance. Ngugi in his novel *The River Between* followed the tradition of folk stories. The very opening lines of the novel depict an image of natural beauty and in these lines how the nature affects life of Kenyan people is also depicted:

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. (1)

The harmony between nature and humans can easily be seen in the opening lines. Valley has been considered as the valley of life which means the people of both the ridges are highly benefitting from nature. These valleys and ridges have been compared with Creator which means nature has been regarded as equivalent to God in Kenya. The naming of these natural resources was done according to the nature of these natural resources according to their impact and relations with the people. as the name of the river was Honia because Ngugi tells, “The river was called Honia, which meant cure, or bring back to life” (1, 2015). The importance of land and its mythological relation with the people of Kenya has been discussed in the novel. Land is one of the vital parts of nature and Ngugi has taken land as an internal part of the Kenyan society in his writings. In this novel, the historical relevance of land has been portrayed by Ngugi through two mythical figures Gikuyu and Mumbi who have been considered as God the community. They have given land to the people of Kenya for their subsistence by saying:

“This land I give to you, O man and woman. It is yours to rule and till, you and your prosperity...The land was fertile. It was the whole of Gikuyu country from one horizon embracing the heavens to the other hidden in the clouds” (2).

All the historical and mythical figures mentioned in the novel are deeply associated with nature. The spiritual sentiments of native Kenyans are grateful to nature because in the remembrance of those historical figures, the natural places related to them have been venerated with full gratitude. “A sacred groove had sprung out the place where Gikuyu and Mumbi stood; people paid homage to it...Mugo waKibiro, that Great Gikuyu seer of old, had been born there.” (2) Ngugi has tried to depict an image of the pre-colonial period of Kenya where things were stable. There was a great balance between nature

and human race. There was a reciprocation policy from nature. Natives had respect for natural resources, so nature also helped them in their daily lifestyle. As Ngugi portrayed, “These ancient hills and ridges were the heart and soul of the land. They kept the tribes’ magic and rituals pure and intact” (2). Ngugi openly asserted that before the advent of colonizers natives were living with a comfortable atmosphere. Even though there were some issues and conflicts between communities, but they have solved their issue without any intervention of outsiders. People were so engrossed with nature that they were familiar with the grassroots of natural resources as Ngugi put in the novel, “these were the people whose blood and bones spoke the language of hills. The trees listened, moaned with the wind and kept silent. Bird and beast heard and quietly listened. Only sometimes they would give a rejoinder, joyful applause and angry roar” (3).

Ngugi in this novel depicted how native Kenyans were dependent on nature for their domestic needs. When Waiyaki’s father Chege took him to the ‘sacred grove’ he explains the uses and harms of various herbs which shows his knowledge about nature:

“The bark of that tree is good for a fresh wound.”

“The roots of this plant are good. When your stomach bites you, you boil them in water. Drink the liquid.”

And sometimes it would be a warning against that tree “whose fruit is full of poison.”

(14)

Chege, the father of Waiyaki was a mysterious and knowledgeable person who had all the wisdom of the Gikuyu community. He knew that his son would one day become a saviour for the Gikuyu community and its people. So, he decided to introduce Waiyaki to all those natural places with whom the mythical figures were associated. He took Waiyaki to a place in the hills from where both the ridges appeared as one and the place compared as beautiful as heaven:

The ridges slept on. Kameno and Makuyu were no longer antagonistic. They had merged into one area of beautiful land, which is what perhaps, they were meant to be. Makuyu, Kameno and other ridges lay in peace and there was no sign of life, as one stood on the hill of God. (16)

Among these hills and ridges, Chege reminds his son Waiyaki about the purpose for which he had taken him to this mythical place. Chege was aware that Waiyaki is just a child that’s why he encouraged him by reciting the stories of some powerful mythical figures of the Gikuyu community and their historical relevance:

“That is the blessed and sacred place. There where Mumbi’s feet stood, grew up that tree. So, you see, it is Kameno that supported the father and mother of the tribe. From here, Murungu took them and put them under Mukuruwewa Ganthanga in Muranga. There our father and mother had nine daughters who bore more children. The children spread all over the country. Some came to the ridges to keep and guard the ancient rites....” (18)

Ngugi through these spiritual stories depicted the fact that the origin of Kenyan people was from ridges, valleys, and forests that’s why these natural places are regarded as their God. Chege tells his son, “You descend from those few who came to the hills” (18). After all this information, Chege talks about the famous prophecy which Mugo wa Kibiro predicted about the advent of colonizers, “Then he cried aloud and said: There shall come a people with clothes like butterflies....” (19). It was the belief of Kenyan people that nature would show them the path to salvation from colonizers. Finally, Chege talks about the most prominent prophecy about the riddance from colonisers which was also made by Mugi wa Kibiro

but nobody believed to his prophecy at the time when he made it. And he warned his son he is the only person in the tribe left who could do this:

“Now listen my son. Listen carefully, for this is the ancient prophecy.... I could not do more.... ‘Salvation shall come from the hills. From the blood that flows in me, I say from the same tree, a son shall rise. And his duty shall be to lead and save the people!’ He said no more. Few knew the prophecy. Perhaps Kabonyi, who has betrayed the tribe, knows about it. I am old my time is gone. Remember that you are the last in this line” (20).

Ngugi through all these references introduced new Kenyan generations to their indigenous culture and its profound relation with nature. All the mythical figures have spent the most time in the lap of nature. A lesson of humanity and morality has also been interpreted by Ngugi. Numerous natural symbols have been depicted that show the love and respect of Kenyan people towards the environment.

Colonization has aimed to destroy nature and its relevance among the natives of African continent. To destroy nature colonizers have very systematically decided to focus on the conversion of religion. They have lured Christianity as a superior religion to native religion for the people of Kenya as Livingstone the missionary head warned natives by giving threatening the refusing Christianity, “Those who refuse him are the children of darkness; These, sons and daughters of the evil one, will go to Hell; They will burn and burn forever more, world unending.” (28) Colonizers were aware that only after the conversion of natives the belief for their nature, customs, and myths can be refuted. As in an article P’Bitek asserted:

The religion of a people is perhaps the most important aspect of their culture. What they believe governs their lives. It provides their “world-view” – the general direction along which they live their lives, and relate to each other and the universe. It guides them in their conduct of war and peace. It is the basis of their behavior towards one another. The knowledge of the religions of our people is the key to the knowledge of our culture (O’Imbo, 2004, p.364).

Ngugi in this novel not only talked about the exploitation of nature, but he laid down a symmetry between nature and women. For Ngugi the plights of women and nature are similar both have been sidelined by their exploiters. The only difference is that women have been exploited by both natives and colonizers. Nyambura wanted to circumcise herself, but she was afraid of her father Joshua who had converted to Christianity. When Muthoni asked her sister why she wanted to circumcise herself and tried to stop her, “But father will not allow it. He will be very cross with you. And how can you think of it?... Besides, you are a Christian. You and I are now wise in the ways of the white people... Jesus told us it was wrong and sinful” (24). For Nyambura circumcision is important because after this she would be more accustomed to the roots of her culture, tradition, and more importantly to nature. She said to Muthoni about her circumcision, “Look, please I – I want to be a woman. I want to be a real girl, a real woman, knowing all the ways of hills and ridges... My life and your life are here in the hills, that you and I know” (25). After the circumcision due to health complications, Muthoni died but before dying she conveys a message to her sister Nyambura that shows her dedication to the native custom and religion, “Waiyaki, tell Nyambura that I see Jesus. And I am a woman, beautiful in the tribe...” (51).

Missionaries tried to convince African people that Whites are civilized and superior to Africans because they follow the holy text, Bible. If they want to become superior and so-called ‘civilized’ then they will have to accept the rituals of the sacred book Bible. As one critic of Chinua Achebe asserted about the mindset of colonisers in the context of the African continent:

Colonizers undermined African culture and ideas such as their gods which had a great role in African society. The missionaries had to label the African beliefs and rituals as barbaric and savage so that their own culture seemed praiseworthy. The Africans, after being converted into Christianity, lost old supporting identity (Carroll, 1990, p. 9).

Ngugi was an optimistic writer who dreamt that one day everything would be perfect. His primary focus was to weave the tapestry of historical phenomena to awaken the native Kenyans about their history. Ngugi knew that youths of Kenya need special attention which is why his protagonist Waiyaki is a teacher who taught children poems with patriotic inclinations:

Gikuyu naa Mumbi  
Gikuyu naa Mumbi  
Left a land virgin and fertile'  
O, come all– (91)

At the end of the novel, there is a wonderful imagination of Nyambura portraying the richness of Gikuyu tradition which involved nature so closely. Nyambura remembers the time she spent at the bank of river Honia and ponders in thoughts:

The wolf also shall dwell with the lamb, and the leopard shall lie down with the kid; and the calf and the young lion and the fatling together; and a little child shall lead them...they shall not hurt or destroy in all my holy mountain: for the earth shall be full of the knowledge of the Lord, as the waters covers the sea (131).

In this novel, Ngugi tried to portray a glimpse of the future which is laid with hope, and optimism. Waiyaki at the end of the finds himself in a helpless situation where his people doubted on his integrity towards his religion and country. The ending of the novel echoed the beginning of the novel where nature has remained similarly relevant amidst all the turmoil and colonial upheavals, “The land was now silent. The two ridges lay side by side, hidden in the darkness. And Honia went on flowing between them, down through the valley of life its been riding above the dark stillness, reaching into the heart of the people of Makuyu and Kameno.” (148)

## Conclusion

Ngugi's *The River Between* was originally titled *The Black Messiah*. The novel is a sovereign exemplification of Kenyan culture, tradition, and customs. Justice for natural and environmental aspects has been regarded as a vital concern by modern literary critics in literature. This novel has dealt with some primal issues of eco-critical study. The very presence of African people can't be imagined without their profound involvement with the environment. In the novel, Ngugi delineated the pre-colonial African culture and its association with nature. Later, the advent of colonisers and their incessant harness of the making of natural resources has also been shown. This paper aims to cover all the issues related to the eco-critical perspectives. Hopefully, the study of this novel from the eco-critical perspective will provide a new amplitude to the eco-critical perspective. The paper also seeks the betterment of the unnecessary exploitation of natural resources by the human race for their short-term advantages.

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