



PRO-COLONIAL ROLE OF MISSIONARIES IN NGUGI'S *THE RIVER BETWEEN*

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ABSTRACT

The role of Christian missionaries in colonized countries is always under discussion. Supporters of colonialism praise the positive role of missionaries but at the same time critics of colonialism brings forth the hidden ideology of Christian missionaries. Ngugi wa Thiong'o, a major voice speaking for Africans, criticizes the role of Christian missionaries in his first novel, The River Between. He holds them for responsible for religious controversy among the people of same tribe and detachment of them from tribal tradition. He puts forth the religious controversy of Kameno and Makuyu ridges. Ngugi aptly presents what missionaries have done to African mind in this novel.

Key Words: Colonialism, Christianity, missionaries, circumcision

The Christian missions played a good, as well as, a bad role in the spread of empire. During colonial period, the missionaries played role of intermediate between harsh government policy and indigenous people. The role of missions in providing education and so increasing literacy in colonies and involvement in medical and health issues and their broad concerns for the effects of practices such as slavery on the rights of individuals are the positive sides of missionaries. But, the latest studies have discovered that the story of Euro-American expansion and the story of missions are deeply intertwined. The relations between them are far more complex than it has been suggested. So, the radical critics of missions argue that missions are the forerunners of more direct control. According to Hobson, missionaries were 'First the missionary, then the Consul, and at last the invading army' (1902:204).

Missionaries also aimed at expansion of Christianity. Sometime, they forced Christianity on natives. The forced Christianity on the natives affected the lives of them. The European exploiters, oppressors and grabbers used this Christianity as a tool to explain and manifest the contradictions portrayed in African literature because of the working out of broader historical



forces. So colonizer assumes that the colonized nation embraces a set of religious beliefs incongruent and incompatible with those of the colonizer. Consequently, he thinks that it is God's given duty to him to bring those stray people to the right path. The coloniser had basic assumptions in defence of his actions. The defenders of colonialism pleaded their case in terms of white man's burden. They argued that it was the obligation of advanced nations to help the people of backward countries. They also expressed the need to civilise and Christianise them, and also to teach them the dignity of labour, and to impress upon them the beauties of their own concepts of law and order. So he forced Christianity on them.

Ngugi wa Thiong'o, a prominent Kenyan writer and critic of colonialism, is a major voice in African literature speaking for Africans. He has presented the evils in colonial and post-colonial Africa through his fiction. He basically focuses on what colonialism has done to African mind and body. His first written novel, set in 1920s pre-colonial time, *The River Between* (1965) tells the story of the separation of two ridges, Kameno and Makuyu, within Gikuyu tribe in Kenya. These tribes are neighbours but difference in faith has separated them. It depicts pre-colonial past of Kenya, as well as, the impact of colonialism in terms of clash between Christianity and traditional religion. Out of these two villages, one is dominated by traditional culture. The other represents the Christian-influenced culture that has begun to replace the tradition. Waiyaki, a missionary-educated local leader, and hero of the novel vainly tries to reconcile the two opposing forces through a symbiosis of Gikuyu tradition and Western education.

The early part of the novels depicts peace in valleys. But the early peace of the land didn't remain same for the long time. Ngugi here tends to suggest that Kenya's pre-colonial history was devoid of any turmoil and conflict until the advent of colonialism. With the arrival of missionaries, it shattered the early peace and harmony to pieces. According to Ngugi,

The coming of Christianity also set in motion a process of social change, involving rapid disintegration of the tribal set-up and the frame-work of social norms and values by which people had formerly ordered their lives and their relationship to others (1972:32).

Colonialism was not the early step of white's being in Africa. They reached there, first as merchants or missionaries. They came there with bible. They taught the locals the teaching of Christ and succeeded in converting some of the locals which marks the clash between natives of same descent but different in faith. Present novel records the early encounter between coloniser and colonised. The novel tries to answers two basic questions: What are the roots of the African predicament? And what role can Africans with formal education play in a divided society? These questions recall the famous Achebean saying: the man who does not know where the rain began to beat him cannot know where he began to dry himself. In Ngugi's vision, the rain began to beat the African with the arrival of missionaries, with the conversion

of some local inhabitants to foreign ways, and the consequent confusion and contradictions at both societal and individual levels resulted by it. Even in the novel, there is prediction of future. Chege reminds the warning to his people which was made by a great seer Mugo wa Kibiro. He was able to see things. The future was unfolded before his eyes. He warned his people of possible future threat. Chege tells Waiyaki that

Mugo was born and grew up in Kameno before he went to tell the people what he saw. For he saw many butterflies, of many colours, flying about over the land, disrupting the peace and the ordered life of the country. Then he cried aloud and said: "There shall come a people with clothes like butterflies" (Ngugi, 1965:18-19).

But Mugo is neglected by his own people. They even branded him as "imposter". As a result, Mugo leaves ridge only to be heard by hills. But Mugo's prophecy is soon fulfilled. With the advent of colonialism and with arrival of missionaries i.e. people with cloths like butterflies, the early peace is disrupted. Chege, an offspring of Mugo, also warns to his people. But like Mugo, he is also laughed by his people. Soon, the ridges who were taking pride in their pre-colonial past become the enemies of each other. Out of them, Kameno remains traditional whereas Makayu is converted into Christianity. The source of life river Honia, then turns into the separating agent of these two ridges and the sleeping lions mentioned earlier become rivals of each other. Ngugi describes it as:

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 (1965:1).

These ridges of Limuru are setting of Ngugi's first four novels. Ngugi uses this landscape to point out the contradictions in the valley. The deeply rooted conflict between the Kameno and Makuyu ridges is centrally one of religious antagonism; whereas the Kameno ridge, home of the novel's protagonist Waiyaki, symbolizes a continuation of indigenous cultural traditions such as polytheism and circumcision. The inhabitants of the Makuyu ridge and followers of Joshua, a converted Christian had already succumbed to the exigencies of Christianity and British educational systems. The effect of colonial religion can be stated in the Ngugi's following words:

In Kenya, while the European settler robbed people of their land and the products of their sweat, the missionary robbed people of their soul. Thus the African body and soul was bartered for thirty Rieces of silver and the promise of a European heaven (1972:32).

The thrust of narrative in the novel mainly drives from the controversy over the rite of circumcision. Circumcision of both the men and women was the way of initiation in manhood and womanhood of all tribes that had not embraced Christianity or the British educational system. In Kameno, the inhabitants are followers of the traditional tribal belief of polytheism. Those who have gone through the rite of circumcision are praised and respected by the inhabitants of Kameno. The Kameno people do not want to accept the new faith and they strongly resisted the white men's way of life. On the other hand, the people of village of Makuyu are the followers of Christianity.

Considering the rivalry over the faith, it is equally important to know the approaches of main characters in the novel regarding the rite of circumcision. In the story, Waiyaki, the son of Chege, is the great leader in the village of Kameno. He has the knowledge and wisdom, as his father Chege has sent him to Siriana to gain knowledge of the white men's advancements to help his village. Waiyaki who is faithful to tribal culture and having the wisdom of whites dreams that one day he would be born again to be a man; "All his life Waiyaki had waited for this day, for this very opportunity to reveal his courage like a man" (Ngugi, 1965:45). He is eager to be circumcised and to be initiated into manhood to gain respect from everyone in his village.

Joshua, who is the leader of Makayu has embraced the religion of Christianity. He is an antagonist to Waiyaki. He is a strict Christian and strongly against circumcision and drinking. Joshua and his wife are circumcised before they became Christians, but he repents hard for being circumcised because it is a sin in his faith; "In fact Joshua believed circumcision to be sinful that he devoted prayer to asking God to forgive him for marrying a woman who had been circumcised" (1965:31). So, circumcision is the main factor that separates the villages. Even the followers of Joshua are strongly against it. But a rebel is born in the house of Joshua. He has two daughters Nyambura and Muthoni. Like her father, Nyambura also considers the practice of circumcision as anti-Christian. But Joshua's younger daughter Muthoni is an ambitious girl. She desires to be a woman in the tribal way, even though she is a Christian. Joshua and his new faith can't give the satisfaction and the sense of completion to her. She says, "...the white man's God's does not quite satisfy me. I want, I need something more" (1965:26). Her quest is far more than satisfaction. In the real sense, she wants to know the real culture of her tribe. She wants to attain womanhood through tribal way. She actually, "...want to be a woman. ...want to be a real girl, a real woman, knowing all the ways of the hills and ridges..." (1965:25) and achieving womanhood tribal way "...is beautiful, oh so beautiful to be initiated into womanhood. You learn the ways of the tribe..." (1965:25).

Muthoni soon goes against her father and joins the circumcision rituals. She secretly goes to her aunt's house in Kameno. There she meets Waiyaki. She defends her decision of running away from her father's house. According to her,

No one will understand. I say I am a Christian and my father and mother have followed the new faith. I have not run away from that. But I also want to be initiated into the ways of the tribe (1965:45)

When Joshua comes to know the rebellion of his daughter, he disowns her. He thinks that “she had sold herself to devil” (1965:53). Muthoni gets circumcised. Unfortunately, her wound doesn’t heal after the circumcision. It gets infected. She is taken to the nearest missionary hospital and dies there. After her death, rumors spread quickly saying that it is her father's curse that caused her death because a girl dying from circumcision was rare. The traditionalists think that it is a curse or a warning to those who have betrayed tribal faith. According to Chege,

Had he not foreseen this drama? Had he not seen the estrangement between father and daughter, son and father, because of the new faith? This was a punishment to Joshua. It was also a punishment to the hills. It was a warning to all, to stick to the ways of the ridges, to the ancient wisdom of the land, to its ritual and song (1965:54).

According to people of Kamneo, her death “had contaminated the hills and Murungu was angry” (1965:58). They also think that she has been poisoned by missionaries. On the other hand, to followers of Christianity, “the death of Muthoni forever confirmed the barbarity of Gikuyu customs” (1965:55).

Livingstone, the head missionary from Siriana, knows very well the tribal warfare from past missionaries. So he doesn’t force Christianity on the villagers. Instead of it, he expects the faith to slowly blend in the land to avoid conflict with the natives. He looks at female circumcision as a barbaric rite and he is greatly shocked when he comes to know that it was Joshua's daughter that died from circumcision. He is appalled that his own student's progeny went through this forbidden practice of Christianity.

Thus, the story depicts Christianity as the cause of the struggle between the followers of the monotheist faith and the polytheist faith. It is the cause of pain and bitterness between these two people of the same origin. It shows that religion can cause great ominous feelings between similar people of different faiths. The death of Muthoni fails to reconcile the gulf between two opposite ideologies but widens it.



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